

Fostering women's participation in development through non-governmental efforts in Cameroon

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Women constitute 52 per cent of the population of Cameroon and play a very crucial role in the development of society at all levels. Unfortunately, they function from a subordinate position inherent in both traditional and state institutions. Women's empowerment is currently an issue of national concern and both state and international efforts at mainstreaming women in development have so far produced mixed results. The 'grassroots' approach of NGOs has been effective in reaching women at all levels. Activities of NGOs have had far reaching but mixed effects in meeting both practical and strategic gender needs. This paper examines case studies of NGOs and women's empowerment in Cameroon, and highlights their successes, with regard to improved access and welfare and their limitations, with regard to conscientisation, participation and control.

KEY WORDS: Cameroon, NGOs, women's empowerment, participation development

Introduction

The UN International Year (1975) and the International Decade for Women (1975–1985) clearly showed a shift in international attention from the initial myopic and negative views held towards women's participation in development to positive and broader ones. The Decade was later followed by conferences such as the Nairobi Conference, the World Conference of Women Forum in 1985, organized by NGOs that centred on women and development and thus demonstrated international awareness of the role of women and NGOs in world development. The 1995 Beijing Conference on Women, that saw the active participation of NGOs, was another milestone in international awareness of women's issues both by men and women. It ended with blueprint recommendations aimed at accelerating the advancement, empowerment and integration of women in development.

Most national governments and NGOs in the South have, since Beijing, tried to move those resolutions off the shelves and into the fields. In Cameroon, for example, efforts such as the creation of the Ministry of Women's Affairs, encouragement of women's movements and attempts to consider some degree of gender balance in appointments and employment are visible. Most of these efforts,

encouraging as they may be, do not seem to affect the poor, uneducated rural, or the low-income urban women. These women continue to do the derogatory tasks as they find it difficult to compete equally with their male counterparts for lucrative opportunities. The gender gap therefore continues to widen in the country.

Local and international NGOs have moved beyond the mere design of top to bottom policies to 'grassroot' approaches in helping women participate fully in national life and, therefore, are fighting inequality and poverty which are household curses in Cameroon. However, even this switch might not be enough if these efforts fall short of meeting both the practical and strategic needs (PGN and SGN) of women, which are crucial to their empowerment.

The research problem

Much of women's work in Cameroon, like that of most developing countries, is not recognized, and therefore not computed in national income statistics. Where women's activities are given some form of recognition, they often do not have the opportunity to excel. At the family level, women are rarely consulted on many basic decisions that directly affect their productive and reproductive lives. National and international NGOs are increasingly

The number of women decreases
as one moves up the
empowerment 'ladder'

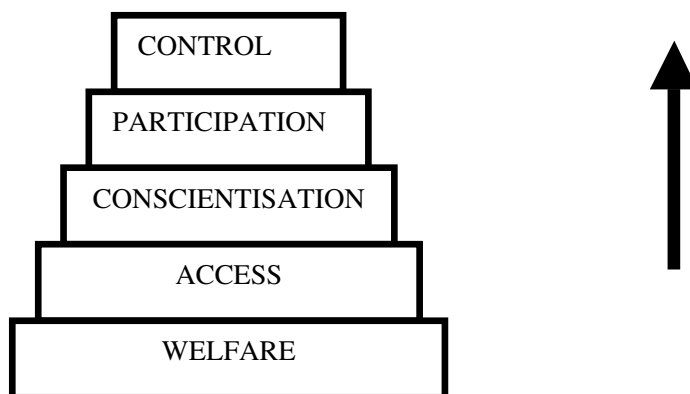


Figure 1 The progressive five stages of women's empowerment through the UNICEF framework

recognizing the strategic role of the Cameroonian woman in the development process. This is evidenced by the existence of many NGOs working alongside women's groups or whose activities are focused on women. NGOs as used in this study to refer to those organizations (local or foreign) outside government direct control, which are legal, apolitical, benevolent and non-profit making, working for the improvement of the lifestyle of a given community in one or more domains. This work seeks to find out to what extent these NGOs have contributed to moving women from their subordinate and poverty-stricken position in Cameroon to one that can enable them to fully participate in all spheres of national life.

In order to focus better on the research problem, the guiding hypotheses here are:

- 1 NGOs working on women issues in Cameroon focus more on the provision of women's practical gender needs than their strategic gender needs; and
- 2 women's empowerment, which is important for their effective participation in development, cannot be easily attained by NGOs alone without contributions from the state and other development agencies in Cameroon.

The context of the research

Just as women's needs are many and vary across the country, there are also many NGOs working with women all over Cameroon. Therefore, a fair evaluation of the contribution of NGOs in fostering women's participation must be based on a representative sample. This requires an extensive review of existing literature and collection of primary data. This literature and data helped to identify women's needs and those NGOs that try to address them.

Primary surveys were carried out with selected NGOs and women in the Centre, North, North West and South West provinces of Cameroon. These four provinces cut across the major ecological and cultural zones of Cameroon. The choice of NGOs used in the study is based on the activities of these NGOs *vis-à-vis* women in the field as portrayed by the literature, and also to ensure a representative geo-cultural coverage of the country. From both primary and secondary data, the activities of NGOs are analysed and evaluated within the UNICEF empowerment framework as articulated by Moser (1993) to see how they address both PGN and SGN. The UNICEF empowerment framework is based on the premise that women's empowerment involves five levels (Welfare, Access, Conscientisation, Participation and Control; Figure 1).

The welfare level requires that all gender gaps between men and women in their material well-being are eliminated. Improving women's welfare alone will leave them as passive beneficiaries or recipients of development assistance: it means, for example, that women are provided pipe-borne water without having the power to influence the location of stand taps. The access level is very important for gender equality as it is at this level that women have the right to obtain services, products or commodities (OXFAM 1994). Eliminating obstacles to women's access to resources (e.g. credit, land) is an important step towards empowerment.

Women's successful drive towards equality and empowerment very much depends on the level of awareness on the extent of women's discrimination among themselves that is created. This is because awareness provides them with the basic actions to overcome and dismantle the obstacles which are holding them back. At the level of participation,

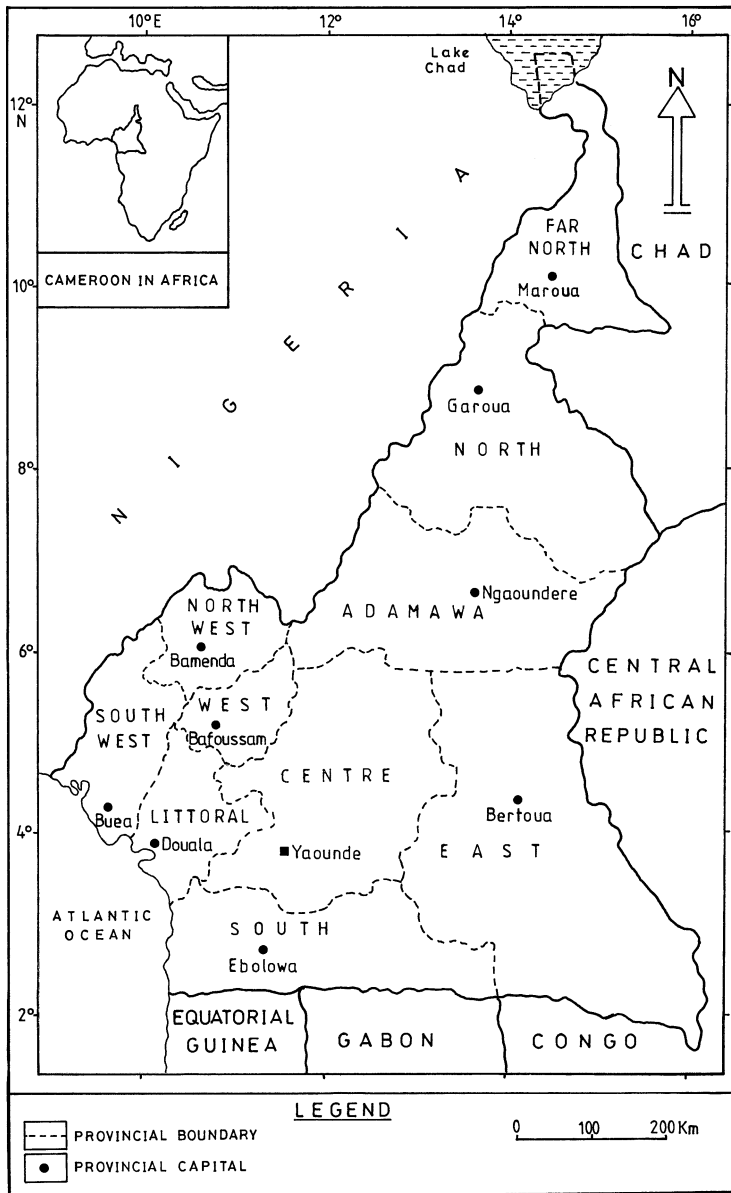


Figure 2 The administrative divisions of Cameroon

women should be able to take part or have a share in both resource and power allocation. This will lead to the level of control where they are able to direct or influence events so that their interests are protected and they are, therefore, empowered at all levels. In fact, empowerment is only real when women have attained control over themselves, resources, factors of production and decision-making, be it at home or in the public arena.

Cameroon is situated at the extreme northern end of the Gulf of Guinea. It lies between longitudes 8° and 16° east of the Greenwich Meridian and between latitudes 2° and 13° north of the Equator covering a total surface area of 475 000 km² (Neba 1997, 1). It shares common boundaries with Chad in the north, Gabon and Congo in the south, Nigeria in the west, and the Central African Republic in the east (Figure 2).

Table 1 Women in top political and related positions in Cameroon in 1997

Positions	Total number of posts	Number of women	% of women
President	1	0	0
Prime Minister	1	0	0
Ministers	24	1	4.1
Vice Ministers	6	1	16.1
Speaker of the National Assembly	1	0	0
Deputy Speakers	4	0	0
Parliamentary Group Leaders	3	0	0
Members of Parliament	180	10	5.5
Provincial Governors	10	0	0
Lord Mayors of City Councils	10	0	0
Members of Economic and Social Council	85	7	8.2
Ambassadors and Consuls	47	1	2.1
Military Generals	10	0	0

Source: Adapted from Siyam (1997)

Cameroon is generally described as 'Africa in miniature' because of its physical and human diversities. Physically, it has four climatic and vegetation zones, a dense hydrologic network, rich soils, coastal lowlands and plains and includes several highlands, plateaux and volcanic massifs. A recent estimate gives a population of over 15 million which consists of many ethnic groups, languages, religious and cultural affiliations (about 52% of this population are women).

Despite their numerical strength, these women, who are a major force of development in the country, unfortunately do not have an equal share of the country's wealth and resources compared to their male counterparts. For example, they constitute two-thirds of the work force; but receive one-tenth of the total income and own one-hundredth of the national property (Akutu 1997; Ngwa 1995). In the rural areas, women represent 56.6 per cent of the rural production force, performing 70.2 per cent of the economic activities as against 56.7 per cent for their urban colleagues (Ngwa 1995). This urban/rural disparity can be partly explained by the fact that most Cameroonian women are involved in agriculture, which is the mainstay of the country's economy and employs about 70 per cent of its labour force (Neba 1997, 84).

If the global situation of Cameroonian women expressed above is narrowed down to particular sectors, the realities of women's marginalization become more evident. In the economic sector, they are mostly found in the informal sector, where they operate as small entrepreneurs (e.g. selling food-stuffs and other articles on the streets and they

operate small bars and restaurants) who cannot expand their businesses because of inadequate access to credit. Even in terms of waged employment, women are mostly found in the teaching and nursing professions, which are generally looked upon as an extension of their caring roles. In the social domain, women in Cameroon are constrained by very stringent gender biases and socio-cultural practices. They can neither own nor inherit property or land; very few girls go to school, they are forced into marriages (often when they are still teenagers); and very few women can decide on the number of children they want to have. These obstacles have resulted in the absence of women in politics and decision-making positions in Cameroon (Table 1) and therefore pertinent issues concerning women not being addressed. For example, women represented only 8.3 per cent in local government in 1986 and 0.11 per cent in national government between 1984 and 1988 (Zang 1997).

The reasons why many women do not assume top political, military and managerial positions are obviously compounded by their triple roles (reproductive, productive and community). In Cameroon, family sizes are generally large. This means that women have to care for and feed a large number of people, many of whom are very young or ageing. These activities are time consuming and demanding. Women are, therefore, left with very little time and energy to benefit from training, education or employment opportunities alongside males. Their reproductive roles, which demand long periods of absence from work (during maternity leaves), do not encourage employers to readily employ them at

good rates. Furthermore, women tend to be absent from political or trade union meetings where most candidates for important posts are invested. This is probably because the timing of these meetings does not usually take into consideration women's household and community commitments.

It is within this unfavourable socio-economic and political environment for Cameroonian women that most NGOs working in the country have made 'gender mainstreaming' one of their major objectives in order to ensure that both the short and long-term needs of women are provided for their effective and efficient participation in development. Participation, in this paper, means that women are both quantitatively and qualitatively involved in nation building and in issues that affect their lives at all levels, and that they reap their share of the benefits. Quantitative participation suggests a situation where many women from all strata of the society are actively involved in all sectors of national life. For example, more women should be able to take part in the industrial or political sectors in Cameroon as they already do in the agricultural sector. Qualitative participation means that women are able to compete with their male counterparts for emerging opportunities in all sectors on an equal footing. That is, they can run or apply for top executive, legislative, diplomatic or military positions, set up larger businesses, and decide on their own destinies without fear or harassment.

Women can only reach this level of involvement when they are empowered. That is they gain a voice, have mobility, establish a presence, obtain control over different aspects of their lives and overpower structures or change them (Johnson 1992, 148). For women to be empowered, their immediate, practical gender needs (e.g. water, safety, income, health) which are crucial in the execution of their triple gender roles in society, have to be fulfilled. In fact, the provision of these needs improves their performance even within the existing gender divisions of labour. Likewise women's strategic gender needs (e.g. education, self-confidence, decision-making); which challenge the existing gender subordination, are essential. For example, why should women not own land or earn lower wages than men in Cameroon?

Women's economic participation

The catastrophic effects of the economic crisis in the late 1980s and the harsh adjustment measures that later followed in the early 1990s, among other factors, encouraged the emergence of many NGOs in Cameroon. Government influence has waned. It has been unable to meet most of the basic needs of the people, leaving the population to take charge

of their destiny through self-reliant development. Community groups and NGOs have been closing ranks to reduce the development gap thus created.

The focus of NGOs on women during the economic crisis is crucial since they were affected more than men. More women than men became unemployed, household incomes fell, subsidies to agriculture became selective, and the informal sector was flooded by newcomers (including men and wives of the élite). Women needed assistance to find new survival strategies to maintain their crucial roles in society. Roles that have been re-echoed by government emphasizing the fact that:

... the challenge of overcoming the economic crisis and other types of crises in our society will be achieved with the Cameroonian women or else it will not be achieved ...

Inter-press Services 1997

Training and acquisition of new skills

Inadequate skills limit women's effective participation in development. Many NGOs in Cameroon have focussed on making women more productive and competitive in the job market. Training is organized in workshops, seminars, demonstrations and training centres and emphasizes the acquisition of knowledge, skills and information as basics for self-reliant development, which better equips the women.

The Sustainable Livestock Foundation (SLF) in the North West province trains women, through group leaders, in sustainable livestock farming. This involves farming in such a way that livestock provide manure for crops, crops provide feed for animals, and livestock manure and crop residues restore soil fertility. The techniques taught reduce women's dependence on the use of fertilizers, thereby allowing for efficient land use and increased access to land since they can now work on grazing land that was not previously cultivated. As a result, the environment is naturally protected. Between 1992 and 1996, over 56 mixed and 66 women's groups were introduced to this technology (SLF Report 1996, 3). In a like manner, the Heifer Project International (HPI) and the World-wide Fund for Nature (WWF) focus on the use of cheap but efficient stoves, improved farming techniques, and alternative income activities (e.g. apiculture) that reduce women's dependence on traditional farming and to reduce deforestation.

Urban women have received similar training in local crafts, marketing techniques and in self-employment strategies. The Organisation Canadienne pour la Solidarité et le Développement (OCS), and the Cameroon Co-operative Union

League (CAMCCUL), alongside other agencies such as Africa 2000, have been instrumental in this training. WWF environmental campaigns have reduced the effect of poor garbage and sewage disposal on infant mortality and medical costs on families, which have consequently spared women from health-related activities.

The training received by women is very important as it tries to meet their practical gender needs with respect to food, land or income. This training enabled women to manage aid and credit and adapt to new technologies. In so doing, they become more self-confident, are able to manage their respective tasks and roles, which helps in finding new ways of breaking the vicious cycle of poverty. This has been the case of the Centro de Investigacion para la Accion Feminina (CIPAF) in the Dominican Republic whose efforts in training women is paying off in the job market (UNDP 1993). The strategy of the SLF has drastically reduced the cultivator-pastoralist tensions common in the North West province where there is limited land for cultivation and grazing. But while all of these are plausible achievements of NGOs, it must be pointed out that they are concentrated at the welfare level of empowerment, they have had little impact on women's subordination. For example, income from the sale of vegetables is small and still leaves women vulnerable to poverty and male domination. For any greater impact to be expected from such initiatives, training should be extended to involve women in areas such as plantation agriculture or cattle rearing, which are often regarded as men's domains.

Accessibility to credit

One of the fundamental problems of the disadvantaged in society is lack of income, credit and other support services. But as Hart (1996) emphasized, credit alone cannot be a solution to poverty. Investment from credit must take into consideration existing market and political environments. This is one of the reasons for the successes of NGOs' credit schemes for women. NGOs provide women with credits in cash and in kind at interest and security-free rates and even help to create markets for the products of these credits.

The aim here is to provide women with directed capital. They plough back profits while returning the initial capital to the NGOs. NGOs make sure that the capital circulates through as many groups as possible to ensure that many benefit. HPI, for example, provides rural women with rabbits for rabbit rearing. Each women's group maintains these rabbits until they reproduce. Once this is achieved, the women retain the young rabbits and return

the original breeding stock to HPI. HPI then passes them to another group. The success of this strategy lies in the fact that women tend to care for the rabbits to ensure healthy delivery, since the offspring eventually belong to them.

CAMCCUL and OCSD provide cash credits, which are repaid gradually in instalments. These credits, which are accompanied by training, have improved the performance of women in the informal sector. Women's activities have been expanded, diversified and are now focused in areas of economic stability such as the food sector. In fact women have more access to capital now as the social stigma, demand for collateral and hostile environment that characterized other forms of credit, have been minimized. Even the problem of distance has been eliminated since credit is negotiated and brought closer to them through group lending.

Many similar success stories have been recorded especially in the North West province where women have used the returns to establish small thrift and credit groups (*njangis*) for mutual benefits (Ngwa 1989). However, the efforts of NGOs in this sector are limited by the amount of credit they can offer. Furthermore, just like training, credit is still geared to providing for immediate needs while maintaining the yoke of subordination. Strategic needs are far from being met. None of the credit is directed towards major investments such as buying shares in big companies or ensuring that women move from the informal to the formal sector. Nonetheless, women's access to microcredit moves them one step up the UNICEF empowerment framework to the level of access (Figure 1).

Women's employment and income

Although unemployment is a major problem in Cameroon, the situation is not the same when analysed along gender lines. The fact that women have fewer formal employment opportunities than men makes them a vulnerable social group. For those that drift into prostitution, exposure to the risk of AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases is increased. This, in turn, diverts government's attention away from wider economic to social problems. In rural areas, teenage pregnancies and marriages are commonplace. This tends to widen the inequality gap because teenage marriages encourage girls to drop-out of school, while less boys drop out. The net result is that a higher proportion of boys are better skilled and more competitive on the job market than girls (Table 2).

NGOs (especially international NGOs), have tried to address women's unemployment and poverty in various ways. Besides the credit

Table 2 Gender division of job seekers in Cameroon according to levels of education

Sex	Level of education			Total
	University graduates	Secondary school leavers	Without any diploma	
Male	1527	2996	843	5266
Female	897	1949	247	3093
Total	2424	4845	1090	8359

Source: MINFI (1998)

Table 3 Women employed in technical and managerial positions within selected NGOs in North West province

NGO	Total number of staff	Male	Female	%female
HPI	6	4	2	33
HEVELTAS	17	11	6	35.3
INADES Formation	4	1	3	75
Bird Life Kilum/Ijime	20	15	5	33.3

Source: Author's field survey (2000)

opportunities for self-employment and training that allow women to compete for jobs with men, NGOs offer employment opportunities. They are generally more sympathetic to women in their jobs and in offers of scholarships (Table 3). Living Earth, WWF, HPI and SNV all recruit women in their projects nationwide, as secretaries, animators and extension staff. PSU offers casual employment to women and men for equal wages. While these casual jobs might not provide women with a stable and sustainable source of income, they nevertheless provide them with a temporary source of earnings from which savings can be accrued for future investment in other income-generating ventures.

In the public sector, local NGOs are mounting pressure on the government for equal employment. The Cameroon Women Caucus (CamWoCa) has recently launched a strategy to ensure that women occupy at least 40 per cent of all the decision-making posts in the country. This involves lobbying state officials, private employers and international organizations to employ women (Inter-Press Service 1997). They also sensitize women to job and career opportunities through newsletters and workshops.

Although these employment opportunities attempt to satisfy practical gender need (access to jobs), they still concentrate women in the lower echelons of society (e.g. as secretaries and deputies). This of course is in part a result of the

type of training offered to women by NGOs. For example, adult literacy, home economics, hygiene and sanitation do not lift women up to high political, managerial or military positions of public responsibility, except in their traditional caring sector. They will only make them better housewives. Therefore, women's training should include areas traditionally reserved for men. Moser (1993) observed that this would not only generate employment but also break job segregation. Women's training is supposed to accomplish a practical gender need (employment) that should lead to a strategic gender need (economic independence). Furthermore, for women to gain 40 per cent of jobs, NGOs should be able to create social facilities, like child care, and provide family education that allows women to gain employment out of the home. Moser (1993) has argued that for child facilities to meet both PGN and SGN, they should also be located at men's as well as women's workplaces to ensure that they both share the responsibilities.

Women's welfare and health concerns

A healthy population is a better labour force. The irony in Cameroon is that as government health expenditure continues to fall (because of Structural Adjustment), the government's propaganda of health for all in the new millennium increases.

Women are those most affected because of their particular health needs (maternity, childcare, STDs). Inadequate provision of health needs increases women's absenteeism from work and consequently reduces their chances of participating in the formal sector. CARE Cameroon has assisted the government in this domain by placing a particular focus on women. Since 1978, when CARE was established in Cameroon, some health projects have been executed in the northern provinces, where high population densities and growth rates and environmental issues surrounding 'desertification' required special attention.

The Reorientation Primary Health Care (RPHC) programme covered maternal and child health. It was aimed at strengthening health delivery services for 750 000 inhabitants in two administrative areas (CARE 1997). Through community discussions, the urgent health needs of the inhabitants were identified as the absence of maternity facilities, lack of healthcare staff and the non-functioning of health centres. At the end of the project, seven hospitals and 46 health centres were stocked and equipped, professional and health community workers (mostly women) were trained and the community health management committees organized with the active involvement of women.

The RPHC project has been a tremendous boon to the women of the north. Infant mortality rates have fallen because women can receive maternity attention. Time and improvement in health has been gained which allows women to spend more productive hours with their children. Women's health groups are emerging focusing on other issues and experiences, e.g. family planning, income generating activities, girl's education and marriage.

Another initiative by CARE targets reproductive health. It aims at reducing the incidence of HIV/AIDS, other STDs and unwanted pregnancies among the 84 000 girls and boys aged between 12 and 24 in the region. Teachers, fieldworkers and peer educators are trained to teach disease prevention and family planning. They work with small groups, which gives opportunities for everyone to participate. An atmosphere of confidence has been established within the community which encourages them to share their experiences since they are of the same age group. Men's participation in group discussions on birth control and custom, enrich the debate and improve the strategies adopted. The mere fact that women's groups are operating in this predominantly Muslim region is an achievement. Rates of teenage pregnancies and early marriages are falling as more girls attend school. STD/AIDS drama plays are an effective communication tool used by CARE, as they attract many youths as actors/audience. The success in preventing

STDs/AIDS in North province has encouraged CARE to move to the East and Littoral provinces.

Furthermore, wells, dams and rainwater catchments have been constructed, existing water systems renovated and the community have been trained in their maintenance as well as in environmental protection in North province (CARE 1997). Women are at the centre of the decision-making and management processes of these initiatives. Water projects are executed along similar lines in the North West by HEVELTAS and SCAN which tend to improve the health of the population and liberate many rural women from the arduous and time-consuming task of fetching water over long distances.

Projects like those of CARE have the potential to meet practical gender needs and transform the position of women because they work with small communities and emphasize community-led development through new skills. Community needs are identified by the people, which improves ownership of and contributes to the success of projects. In fact the size, flexibility, community solidarity and commitment of NGOs to community needs sharply contrasts with state bureaucratic top-down approaches often characterized by corruption and laxity on the part of its staff. However, the weaknesses of the sectoral approach of most NGOs is that projects are not always comprehensive enough to meet both the practical and strategic gender needs which are vital for women's empowerment.

NGOs and women's rights

Women's empowerment requires that the population in general as well as the women themselves, know the extent of their problems, so that proper strategies can be adopted to reverse the situation. Without this awareness, referred to as 'conscientisation' in the UNICEF framework, some women are likely to lag behind. As observed so far in this paper, most activities of NGOs do not really address these issues other than providing basic needs and coping strategies for women. Few NGOs are venturing into the domain of conscientisation in Cameroon.

The Federation of International Women Lawyers (FIDA) in Cameroon has been raising public awareness of discrimination against women. FIDA organizes workshops, debates and sketches that focus on women, marriage and property rights and the law. Women are made to understand that girls have equal rights to education as the boys and, that in case of a divorce, a full-time housewife is entitled to one-third of the family property or 50 per cent of the property for any contribution made to an investment during marriage. FIDA also argues that not all cultural beliefs are acceptable (*Women*

Outlook 1997, 5). Unfortunately, the impact of FIDA is still limited to cities because their limited resources do not permit them to penetrate into the interior where the greatest injustices to women's rights are often perpetuated. Even when workshops are organized in the provinces, many poor rural women do not attend owing to difficulties around transportation.

The Association of Cameroon Female Jurists tries to fill the gaps in FIDA's work. It has more of a 'meet the people' approach by touring the cities with its 'mobile clinics'. These consist of a team of jurists who provide women with free legal consultations and counselling across the country on a personal basis. They also run radio and television programmes on women's rights. These consultations are helpful to women in redressing many situations that would otherwise deteriorate because of fear, cost or ignorance. Women can now seek legal action on family property at divorce or death of their husband. But again, the mobile clinics operate only on specific days and do not have the staff and infrastructure to meet the growing public demand.

Women working in the media, through the National Association of Professional Media Women (NAPMEW), are using audio-visual media to increase support for equality in all sectors of the society. Programmes such as 'Calling the Women' and 'Feminine Line' which are broadcast on public media reach sizeable audiences. These programmes address issues such as family planning, marriage, property and political rights, circumcision, bride price and inheritance, with prominent public figures as guests (Akutu 1997, 5; Epie 1997, 37). Programmes are also broadcast in local languages to maximize their audiences. One problem here is that with the work schedule of many women, few may have time to listen to radio; another problem is that the poorest households do not have radios. Most programmes are broadcast without consideration of women's household time schedules.

Conscientisation is a crucial stage of empowerment, as recognized by the UNICEF framework, since it allows women to see their own subordination and how to overcome it through women's organizations. However, women are not a homogenous group and they suffer from various levels of discrimination. These vary across regional, cultural and social strata and therefore need to be addressed within those specific contexts.

Cameroon women in politics

The political advancement of women depends on expanding the legal, institutional and socio-cultural

space that they are able to command. Progress in these areas provides women with the means and mobility necessary for political activities. Welfare provision, economic empowerment, education and the fight for other rights by NGOs are instrumental in effective political participation. Political participation does not occur in a vacuum. Space must be conquered for this to be done.

The family is obviously the starting point for progress into wider society. Women have to be involved in family decisions that affect their lives, those of their children and the management of family income (UNICEF 1993). This is the focus of the work of CAMNAFAW and the Bahai international community in Cameroon. CAMNAFAW is unique in its approach to gender issues in that it involves both men and women working with the Planned Parenthood Federation (CAMNAFAW 1993). Its objectives are to work towards family welfare and responsible parenthood through counselling and education on the consequences of irresponsible sexuality and the provision of family life education to the target population (CAMNAFAW 1988).

The Bahai community uses the traditional media (folk tales and songs) to preach equality. A campaign carried out in seven villages in the South West province has produced some startling results. For example, a 1992 survey of 45 randomly selected families revealed that in 90 per cent men took all household decisions alone. A repeated survey on the same families in 1993, indicated that in 80 per cent of the families, men and women now took decisions together. These decisions concern basic family issues such as the acquisition and disposal of property and childrens' education, but also what seemed very unlikely fundamental issues such inheritance or the getting a second or third wife. In Badan village alone, girls' school enrolment rose by 82 per cent (Karl 1995, 112). These results suggest that both male and female ignorance is a major obstacle to women's participation to decision-making. Therefore, if the Bahai experiment can be improved upon, and sustained and implemented in other parts of the country, a significant change might be possible in male attitudes towards women's empowerment; and the numbers of families where concerted decisions between husbands and wives are reached will increase.

While women may be participating in family decision-making, their impact will be more significant if it is sustained and extended to other sectors of society. Unfortunately, the political sphere where the core of empowerment lies is still a male monopoly. Women are under-represented in parliament, cabinet, councils, and ambassadorial and

Table 4 Summary of the impact of NGOs on women's empowerment in Cameroon

NGO	Activities	Impact and gender need	UNICEF empowerment framework level	Remarks
CARE	Provision of water and primary health care	Employment, time (PGN)	Welfare	Women are still passive recipients; but are now better farmers than before
CAMNAFW	Family education and welfare	Birth control, sharing in household decisions and tasks (PGN, SGN)	Welfare and participation	Women can share in discussions about birth control but men still take the final decision
CamWoCa	Women's sensitization and lobbying	Employment and political representation (SGN)	Participation	Women can vote during elections on the lists provided to them but they cannot seriously influence the choice of candidate
CAMCCUL	Provision of credit and training	Income generation and employment (SGN)	Welfare and access	Women have access to a small amount of credit which still leaves them in the informal sector
ACAFEJ	Defence of women's legal rights	Ownership of property and decision-making (SGN)	Participation and access	Women can have access to property in case of divorce but a girl child still cannot claim inheritance
HPI	Provision of training and credit	Income generation and employment (PGN)	Welfare and access	Training still limited to managing small-scale assistance
NAPMEW	Women's rights sensitization	Women's movements (SGN)	Conscientization	Women are aware of most of their rights but this is limited to the lower number of urban women
SLF	Agricultural training	Land management (PGN)	Access	Can only work on land given to them without control and such land can be regained by the owner

international organizations (Table 1). NGOs have made little impact here as the results of the last elections and appointments in Cameroon still maintain the *status quo*.

Mainstreaming women in Cameroon

NGOs might have done much to mainstream women in development in Cameroon but their efforts still fall short of meeting their strategic needs for a long-term solution to the relative lack of empowerment. As Table 4 indicates, most NGOs have tried to move women from one rung to another (especially from the welfare to the access level) on the UNICEF empowerment ladder. In fact most Cameroonian women are now better

housewives, better farmers or better small traders than in the past but are not really empowered. In other words, the level of poverty among women has been reduced without any significant change in their subordinate status. Therefore, they can hardly participate effectively and efficiently in all spheres of national life, as could have been the case if empowerment had taken place. NGOs need help from other agencies to complement what they are doing to ensure that these women take part in decision-making. This, of course, requires a change of strategy and focus from most NGOs and greater support from other governmental and international agencies. Only then can the Cameroonian women talk of empowerment as conceived by the UNICEF framework.

However, the Cameroon Government has recently taken some positive measures in mainstreaming women, which, if sustained, are capable of moving women through the UNICEF empowerment framework to the level of control. In 1987 the Ministry of Social Affairs was reorganized as the Ministry of Social and Women's Affairs to better cater for women's interest. A full Ministry of Women's Affairs was later created in 1997 whose efforts to empower women are evident. For example, it has created Women's Empowerment Centres throughout the country, which organize women, provide them with vocational training on, for example, income-generating activities, family planning, hygiene and sanitation and home management. Training and information are of utmost importance especially to the rural women who are the greatest victims of violence, lack of education, poverty and large family sizes.

In terms of Higher Education, the government has created a Department of Women and Gender Studies at the University of Buea, to encourage the training of gender experts. This is the only such specialized department in West Africa that trains such experts. Students undergoing training here are involved in countrywide research that will eventually help the government in conceiving gender-aware policies and in changing existing gender-stereotyped policies and programmes in the country. This initiative of targeting women in the tertiary sector (meeting gender strategic needs like education) facilitates women's participation in decision-making and control over resources.

With these efforts from the government and NGOs some positive results have been recorded, especially in the areas of the education of the girls and of women asserting themselves and rising to leadership positions. In the area of education, for example, a cross comparison of the situation of female enrolment in certain disciplines (often reserved for males) in the 1980s and in 2000 in Cameroon universities in general and the University of Buea in particular, show marked increases of 9.3, 20 and 26 per cent of female enrolment in Maths/Computer Studies, Business Studies and the Natural Sciences respectively.

The limits of NGOs' efforts

The empowerment of women is fundamental in addressing gender issues such as discrimination and subordination. Unfortunately, empowerment of women within the Cameroonian context is often mistaken as simply providing women's access to basic needs without having control over them (and properly benefiting from them). This can be partly explained by the shortcomings of NGOs (especially

local NGOs), which are at the forefront of helping women, and the absence of an enabling environment.

Most NGOs lack adequate funds as a result of donor fatigue. The small funds received from donors are expected to be channelled into well-defined activities that must produce a specific set of outcomes. On the other hand, they face increasing demand for funds from women to carry out small-scale activities. NGOs are therefore under continuous pressure from both donor agencies and their beneficiaries. In order to produce the desired results, they tend to give out very small amounts for loans, and then only for welfare measures that are easily visible rather than engage in complex activities that empower women which cannot be quantified.

The funding is directly related to that of experienced qualified staff. Local NGOs working on gender issues often do not have staff trained in the relevant skills. From a total of ten NGOs sampled, none had a gender expert. They tend to incorporate degree holders or retired agricultural extension workers in the social sciences. Most of their seminars therefore lack sophistication or elements of theoretical understanding. Moreover, many staff work on a voluntary basis.

Furthermore, the absence of enough funds and qualified staff is compounded by the problem of logistics. They work without basic office infrastructure (e.g. computers, telephones vehicles) and therefore encounter many delays in communicating with their target population. While this might not be a serious problem to international NGOs such as HELVETAS, CARE and HPI, it is a serious problem to local NGOs like SLF and CAMCCUL. Again there are many NGOs working in the field without concerted action programmes. There is a duplication of activities in regions. In addition, many NGOs seem to be fighting over communities rather than working together through a network for the empowerment of the community. Under such conditions NGOs can only meet the short-term needs of the women. This has led to empowerment at the welfare and access levels, which of course should not be the goal of development projects and programmes, but they should aim to reach the levels of empowerment and control.

Conclusion

NGOs have been successful in increasing women's access to resources in Cameroon. But a lot remains to be done to try to truly empower the Cameroonian woman. Their interventions have improved women's access to health, credit, training, employment, and family decision-making and

they provide opportunities for women to exchange ideas. All these satisfy women's immediate needs such as food, health and water, which are required by everybody, especially children. But NGOs have had little impact in reversing discrimination against and subordination of women. In other words, their strategic gender needs have not yet been met. Women's access to political participation and control, which the UNICEF framework sees as the high point of empowerment, is still inadequate. This apparently requires a more comprehensive approach which goes beyond the purview of development NGOs alone. This is because the provision of strategic gender needs touch on fundamental cultural and institutional changes that might be interpreted as foreign intervention on domestic issues from international NGOs. Local NGOs and civil society are better placed to take the initiative here but, unfortunately, they lack the necessary human and material resources to take the lead. Interventions by the state, local and other international agencies are therefore indispensable for long-term results.

Partnerships with the state and other development and traditional institutions that will challenge existing discriminatory laws and policies at all levels are therefore crucial. Such interventions will complement the work already done by NGOs at the level of practical gender needs. This is because the government, and men, seem to have a vested interest in women's subordination. Otherwise, how can one explain the fact that marriage and property laws, population and social benefit policies, minimum wage rates, are all dictated by the Cameroonian state yet continue to repress women? Fundamental changes towards women's empowerment in Cameroon will not be possible without a remarkable change in male attitudes and contributions from government and other development agents.

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