

## Article

# NGO-state interaction and the politics of development in Cameroon in the context of liberalisation

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The economic downturn and consequent impoverishment in Cameroon have led to a large increase in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are being heralded by some as the development panacea. This has triggered some readjustment in the dynamics of interaction between the Cameroonian state and NGOs with the promulgation of the 1999 law to control NGOs. This paper critically explores the emerging trends and the roles played by international and local NGOs in the face of the burgeoning interests of civil society. The analysis points to some benchmarks and challenges faced by these actors in capacity building and socio-economic empowerment of local communities in Cameroon. Findings indicate that international NGOs are more organised, more focused, decentralized, technically proficient, and financially viable and have deeper penetration into communities than local NGOs that are plagued by lack of expertise, poor management and funding difficulties. The paper concludes that in spite of attempts by the Cameroonian state to regulate the activities of the NGO sector; there are still inadequacies.

**Key words:** Cameroon, liberalisation, NGOs, local development, gender mainstreaming, civil society.

## INTRODUCTION

Neoliberal social and economic policies, state downsizing and the changing political terrain has significantly altered and restructured civil society in Cameroon, with international and local (national) NGOs in the forefront of the fight against worsening poverty. The struggle for social justice and liberalisation has led to several activities with the potential for state building. This paper focuses on international and local NGOs against the backdrop of economic restructuring and the declining role of the state. As states downsize, NGOs in general "have come to be regarded as the vehicle of choice- the magic bullet for fostering (these) currently fashionable development strategies" (Gruhn, 1997) quoted in Alvarez (1998:123). Green and Mathias (1997) note that the last decade has seen a dramatic surge of interest in the activities of NGOs, which they refer to, as the emerging third sector. According to the rhetoric that surrounds NGOs, they are able to deliver higher quality services to the very poorest sectors of the

society while remaining cost-effective and efficient (Cernea, 1988; Clark, 1991; Fowler, 1988).

For the last 13 years, Cameroon has been undergoing economic restructuring. The introduction of economic reforms and the implementation of structural adjustment programmes meant that the state could not fulfil its responsibility of providing social amenities. The states inability to enhance the welfare of the population and in service provision in general led to the burgeoning of NGOs in Cameroon and particularly in the North-west Province. Yenshu (1998) notes that NGOs have come to increasingly occupy the space of development discourse and practice with government's disengagement from local development. The growth in the NGO sector is inherently associated with the rise of an influential consensus spearheaded by international financial institutions (World Bank and the IMF) over the need for political democracy and good governance on one hand, and on the other, economic liberalization, the rolling back of the state and the encouragement of the private sector to step into the gap (Mercer, 1999).

NGOs as agents of change and channels for development assistance are providing the impetus within civil

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society. How they succeed in this task depends on the partnership with the state and relations with local communities. NGOs are simultaneously regarded as important constituents and boosters of civil society. It is also argued that the empowering and participatory nature of NGOs, as well as their ability to encourage the poor to articulate their political and social needs, can ultimately facilitate the emergence of a stronger civil society (Healey and Robinson, 1993; Hyden, 1995). Elsewhere, NGOs are considered as a fundamental linchpin in civil society responding to the development concerns of local communities. The study looks at the role of NGOs in the liberalized development arena of the North-western Province of Cameroon, particularly in the context of poverty and improvement of livelihoods. There is little data to indicate the extent to which indigenous NGOs work specifically with the poorest since in common with the Cameroonian development community in general, NGOs have used working in rural areas as a proxy for working with the poor (Fox, 1993). According to Fowler (1995), assessing the performance of NGOs has become increasingly necessary with the growing number of NGOs receiving funding and demand of accountability to beneficiaries or partners and donors/trustees. It becomes fundamental to evaluate the performance and transformational potential of these development actors.

## RESEARCH AND METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXTS

The liberalisation of the economic and political climate in Cameroon following the 1990 liberty laws generated many groups, associations and organizations within the framework of civil society for example, political parties, churches, labour and trade unions, urban community organisations, common initiative groups, cooperatives and civil society activists. The steady growth in civil society led to the proliferation of NGOs and common initiative groups. This paper seeks to appraise the activities of NGOs as development organisations vis-à-vis the regulatory role of the state. The paper examines the efforts of some international and local (national) NGOs in transforming urban and rural communities in north-western Cameroon. This was done through an examination of their major activities and some realized projects in the province. The emergence of NGOs as a stronger force within civil society may be viewed as a positive development but a closer and critical look at their activities show that their reach is still limited. This is not the case with international NGOs that execute elaborate, widespread and sustainable programmes and projects with a high trickle down effect than local NGOs that are also attempting amidst difficulties, to gain grounds in welfare programmes geared at alleviating poverty.

To better situate the problem, the objectives of the paper are:

(i) To determine the scope of activities of some interna-

tional and local NGOs.

(ii) To elicit the viewpoints of local communities on the development efforts of NGOs.

(iii) To appraise law No. 90/053 of 19/12/90 relating to the formation and functioning of associations with emphasis on the 1999 law to govern the activities of NGOs in Cameroon.

The data used for the analysis was drawn from primary surveys of some international and national NGOs operating in the North-west Province of Cameroon. In-depth interviews were carried out in the short-listed organizations. These included Plan International, Inades Formation, Association of Women's Information and Coordination Offices (AWICO), Society for Initiatives in Rural Development and Environmental Protection (SIRDEP), Integrated Development Foundation (IDF), African Community Development and Environmental Protection (ACDEP), Human Rights and Counselling and Education Centre (HURLLRD), Swiss Association for Development and Cooperation (Helvetas), Hiefer Project International (HPI), African Development Foundation and Support Service to Grassroots Development Initiatives (SALID). This permitted a critical appraisal of the degree of partnership with the state, grassroots institutions and communities. To assess the successes or failures of NGOs, field visits were affected to some recipient communities and project beneficiaries. The level of participation and the effective involvement of these organisations in the localities were assessed through the conduct of interviews and discussions that enabled groups and community members to assess the efforts of the organisations they were opportune to work with. Respondent's viewpoints were also elicited on the outreach efforts of NGOs in poverty alleviation, credit provision, fostering local participation, attempts at addressing the practical and strategic gender needs of the population through a questionnaire.

## GEOGRAPHY AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC LANDSCAPE OF NORTH WEST PROVINCE (NWP)

Despite economic growth rates averaging 7% per year between 1965 and 1985, Cameroon experienced both a high degree of poverty in rural areas, marked inequality in the distribution of incomes and significant regional disparities in poverty levels according to the World Bank (1995, 1999). The period since the mid-1980s has been one of rapid impoverishment in Cameroon with per capita consumption declining by about 50% between 1986 and 1993 and a marked increase in urban poverty (Republic of Cameroon, 2000). A 1996 household survey by the World Bank indicated that nearly 40% of households, representing about half the population are below the poverty line (about US\$ 240 per year). Poverty remains predominantly rural, with 86% of the poor living in rural areas and nearly two in three rural residents as regarded as poor according to World Bank survey.

**Table 1.** Geographical distribution of NGOs in Cameroon.

Province	Number of NGOs
Centre	112
Littoral	35
North west	32
South west	27
West	18
Far north	5
South	4
North	3
East	2
Adamawa	0

Source: Derived from UNDP survey of NGOs in Cameroon, 1997.

The North West Province (NWP) is ranked third out of the ten provinces in the country with an estimation of 365,352 poor. The World Bank's report further notes that women constitute 52% of the three million people who cannot afford even the food components of a 'consumption basket' which indicates a situation of extreme poverty. In Cameroon, women make up the majority of the poor living below the poverty line. Poverty is particularly acute for women living in rural areas and heading households (UNDP, 1998). In spite of their tremendous contribution to the growth and development of their communities, they still live in abject poverty. In terms of absolute numbers, the North-west and Western Provinces host the highest numbers of poor.

A recent survey of households in the province by the Provincial Service of Statistics (2004) shows that the trend has not changed. The case of the North-west Province is remarkable due to its high population density and a rural economy that thrives on subsistence agriculture that yields little income and which can barely sustain livelihoods. The region is witnessing a scanty presence of government in terms of development and is considered one of the most deprived in the country and is suffering from political marginalisation because of its widespread support for the main opposition party- the Social Democratic Front. This situation can be discerned from the fact that for the past 12 years, its state investment budget has been one of the lowest despite its large population. Erstwhile Secretary of State, No.1 in the Ministry of National Education, Joseph Yunga Teghen (2002) indicated over Cameroon Radio and Television (CRTV) (2002) that "any person who looks at the investment budget in Cameroon will see that the distribution of the budget is done following the voting pattern in the country". To buttress this point, the 2001-2002 state budget shows that the large and populated North-west Province had an investment budget of barely FCFA 5 billion. The south-west which is comparatively smaller had about FCFA 16 billion. This trend has continued till date (2009). This is because the

south west is seen by the government to be predominantly behind the ruling party, the Cameroon Peoples Democratic Movement (The Post, 2002). The North-west Province is made up of seven administrative divisions: Mezam, Momo, Boyo, Bui, Donga /Mantung, Menchum and Ngokentunjia. Its population is estimated at 1.7 million (Ministere de l'Economie et des Finances (1998) making it the fifth most populated province in Cameroon. Population mobility is high, partly as a result of the harsh socio-economic environment, the absence of industries and poor basic infrastructure.

Agriculture is the backbone of the province's economy employing more than 70% of the active working population. The main agricultural activities are traditional food crop cultivation and livestock production on small land holdings. Women and men constitute approximately 54% and 46% respectively of the economically active rural population.

## REPRESENTATION OF NGOS IN CAMEROON AND NGOS STUDIED

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 and community groups, village development associations and NGOs have been closing ranks to reduce the development gap thus created (Fonjong, 2001; Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002).

UNDP identified approximately 150 NGOs in Cameroon in the late 1990s (Table 1). More NGOs have been created since this survey. Not all local and international NGOs are featured in this survey, and with respect to the North-west Province, there are approximately ten International NGOs operating there. The survey showed that the development activities of the NGOs included health, education and training, environment, women's development, democracy and human rights, rural and urban development, capacity building and research, HIV/AIDS sensitization and community development in partnership with community based organizations.

NGOs in the North-west Province are aided in their outreach activities by the receptive nature of the people. Their existing sustainable self-help and self-reliance development efforts (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002) are important factors in attracting NGOs. Acho-chi (1998) identifies four critical factors: a) diffusion of decision-making power; b) dynamic, vigorous organised societies with effective leadership; c) a culture of mutual assistance and; d) relevant local democratic organisations.

From the survey undertaken by the UNDP (1997), there are some discrepancies in the statistics on the registration of NGOs at the Provincial level. The numbers of NGOs have been swelling in the Province (Table 2). Some of the NGOs did not feature in the UNDP survey.

The data (Table 2) shows the cumulative registration of

**Table 2.** Registration of local NGOs in the North-west Province.

Year	Number of NGOs
1995 -1998	123
1999 -2002	137

Source: Bamenda divisional office (July, 2001).

local NGOs in the North-west Province. It should be noted that international NGOs are registered at the central level, having decentralized operational units covering a huge geographical area of the country. The major international NGOs operating in the Province are: Plan International, Swiss Association for Development (Helvetas), Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), Inades Formation, Heifer Project International, Bird Life International, Bamenda Highlands Project, Support Service to Grassroots Initiatives of Development (SAILD) among others. Since the number of international and local NGOs is growing almost annually, a simple random selection of five major international and local NGOs (Tables 2 and 3) was undertaken based on their field activities and target population. NGOs operate close to the grassroots as catalysts of community development (Zih, 2001) and are in a position to play a valuable role as partners in project planning and implementation.

## NGOS AND LOCAL RESOURCE MOBILISATION

Most activities of both international and local NGOs are relief orientated and work in liaison with the local communities. The willingness of the local communities to liaise with NGOs can either create a conducive environment or a barrier to the efforts of NGOs. Acho-chi (1998) observes that the rural communities of the region are characterised by primary relations and the belief that collective work is superior to individual labour. This has created a smooth terrain for NGOs to mobilise the activities of local interest groups.

The NGOs operating in the province are involved in mobilizing women and men in local development efforts. Evidence from the study indicates that women's farming groups and other grassroots structures are used by NGOs to access the communities. SAILD and Plan both try to promote an atmosphere of self-reliance. SAILD undertakes training with farmer unions on production services, savings, credit and transfer of agricultural technology. Their newspaper "The Farmer's Voice" disseminates information on group organisation and management, practical farm techniques and lessons on good agricultural practices. (The Farmers' Voice, 2000). Plan contributed 43 million francs CFA to Bamali (Ngoketunjia) water project which is ongoing, with the community contributing the equivalent of 5 million francs CFA in terms of sand, nes and labour to dig the pipeline.

Women's farming groups are the most vital structures

since they constitute the lifeline of income generating activities that maintain household stability and ensure food security. The support group, Service to Grassroots Initiatives of Development (SAILD) is concerned with the problems of small farmers for example, training, finance, technical expertise, access to land and agricultural inputs (Table 4). Despite the attempts at tackling poverty through credit mobilization and microfinance, the women still remain outside decision-making circles, a condition determined by their limited access to and control over vital resources like land and credit. SAILD's policy of self-help development employs the participatory approach of interaction with farmer's groups to better understand their constraints. SAILD works with its main partner, the North West Farmer's Organisation (NOWEFOR) in organising education and training courses on group management, book keeping, credit and savings. This has improved the management skill and human capital of women and men's groups. More than 90% of the groups indicated that the training they had acquired had improved their style of group management which had had a direct influence on group livelihoods.

Plan International's interventions are set against a backdrop of improving conditions for children and this can only materialise if women are empowered. Currently, women are mostly sidelined in development-oriented activities. In the province 82% of the members of development committees are male (Plan International, 1999). This fact led to increased attention in addressing women's needs in the province through intensified mobilisation. Plan International focuses on underprivileged children and their families, with the primary objectives of improving the quality of life of deprived children. It also assists communities to be organised themselves in order to maximize their own resources for self-reliant development with the involvement of women and children as active and valued members. Plan's technical training courses encourage the training of women farmers in land preparation, planting, weeding, harvesting and food storage. Demonstration plots on organic farming and use of improved crop varieties have been introduced to boost agricultural production and reduce post harvest losses. Farming groups are also provided with implements and inputs like cutlasses, hoes and fertilizers.

The policies and actions of most NGOs are directed towards the problems of access to training and information, credit, and production inputs. They also target the eradication of cultural barriers in communities that are blocking women from taking an active part in development matters. While the Heifer Project International (HPI), SAILD and the Association for Women's Information and Coordination Offices (AWICO) are tackling some of these problems, Plan International tries to dismantle cultural barriers confronting women and girls. Despite these attempts, most women in the province are still lagging. The majority of women who bear the sole responsibility of the welfare of children live in extreme poverty in most rural communities in the province. Thus, if

**Table 3.** Activities and some realized projects of some local NGOs in the North-west Province.

NGO	Major activities	Some projects executed
<b>Association of Women's Information and Coordination Offices (AWICO)</b>	Sensitisation and awareness creation, Project planning, monitoring, and evaluation. Provision of credit and small loans. Financing small-scale projects e.g. animal husbandry, poultry keeping, and formation of cooperatives.	Financed 167 small scale projects in trading, farming and machine supply. Training in business management and book keeping, numerical skills. About 6000 women have benefited from the above activities.
<b>Society for Initiatives in Rural Development and Environmental Protection (SIRDEP)</b>	Training programmes (NGO focus) in soil conservation/agro-forestry, tree nursery techniques, oil palm production, storage techniques, natural crop protection, gardening, piggery farming. Protection of water catchments Promoting women's micro projects, water drainage and urban development, creation of cooperative unions and entrepreneurship, productive credit schemes.	7 types of training at the grassroots level with 20 groups totalling 842 participants. Adult literacy programme for the Mbororo-Fulani communities in Donga-Mantung Division. Training realised at the level of development workers with many organisations
<b>Integrated Development Foundation (IDF)</b>	Training of group members and local animators; Construction of schools; Provision of pipe-borne water, etc; Gender programmes for communities; General construction e.g. roads bridges, community halls; Promote income generation; consultancy services, environmental protection, hygiene and sanitation through tree planting and rubbish collection; Training programmes for group members.	Trained 200 rural animators; trained 23 people in manual typing and computing; 15 Bridges constructed; 4 water supplies established; 3 water networks created; renovation of a hospital ward; loans to 6 groups ranging from 500,000 to 1.5 million FCFA; trained 39 groups in marketing, and women's groups on textile transformation.
<b>African Community Development and Environmental Protection (ACDEP)</b>	Training of elected representatives at local, regional and national levels; Non-partisan democratic observation system; Capacity building for women's self-development.	Group training sessions; provision of agricultural inputs (corn mills, cassava graters, palm oil processing machines) to groups especially in Momo Division; construction of Wumneburg bridge in Momo Division; feasibility studies carried out on 20 projects.
<b>Human Rights Counselling And Education Centre (HURCLED Centre)</b>	Legal aid services and education	Civic education to many communities in the province; legal aid and counselling to women's groups; emphasis on children's rights and procedures of the law; human rights activities in many divisions of the province.

Source: Authors' fieldwork (2008).

rural communities have to be taken out of squalor, disease and poverty, they have to enjoy basic amenities.

Swiss Association for Development and Cooperation (Helvetas) has a permanent programme of building feeder roads (farm to market roads) linking production areas to consumption centres. Their expertise in the development of catchments areas, watershed conservation, water supply and construction of bridges and culverts is impressive in Cameroon (Table 4). Their efforts at building rural infrastructure have led to the disenclavement of most rural communities. The construction of water points as

testified by 80% of the respondents has led to a reduction in waterborne and water related diseases in their communities. Women's drudgery and long treks to fetch water are checked (Helvetas 1989). Helvetas' executed water schemes in collaboration with communities have an estimated coverage rate of 80% of the villages in the Province reaching out to all the seven divisions. Community participation is also fostered through the creation of village water management committees to manage and maintain water facilities.

Clearly, women in such communities have been spared

**Table 4.** The major activities of some international NGOs in the North-west Province.

NGO	Major activities	Some realized projects
<b>Swiss Association for Development and Cooperation (Helvetas)</b>	General constructions e.g. water, roads, community halls; Training programmes; Assistance to local NGOs, CIGs, and women's groups through networking with AWICO; Bee farming; Maintenance of completed projects	More than 40 water supply projects in the province with the participation of the communities; many farm-to-market roads constructed e.g. Kurku, Njikwa-Menka, Oshie-Konda, Mmea-Eseh, and Widikum-Befang; construction of bridges e.g. Kurku, Kai, Chup, Ekoh- Menka; many training programmes organised for village development committees, water management committees and group leaders; assistance to many women's groups.
<b>Inades Formation</b>	Provide agricultural apprenticeships, small project management and rural self-help training. Broadcast radio programmes (e.g. Calling the Women, Rural rendezvous) on community mobilization, care and breeding of domesticated animals, and environmental issues like bush fires and tree planting. Sustainable development through short-term training of local NGO and group leaders in project management for community development, resource mobilisation, book keeping and project maintenance.	Hundreds of short-term training programmes organised for local leaders; Provision of booklets, technical leaflets and other educational materials to groups and communities.
<b>Heifer Project International (HPI)</b>	Distribution of goats, piglets, rabbits, cows, fowls, etc to individual farmers through organised groups; training farmers in animal husbandry; credit provision to groups; assistance in construction of roads and bridges; Identify, assist and set up priority development needs of villages Build with local and imported materials.	More than 200 farmers groups have benefited from animal distribution schemes; many farmers trained in animal husbandry and ethno-vet practices; credit provided to groups
<b>Plan International Cameroon</b>	Construct water supply, roads, schools and community halls; training of villages for project sustainability; promoting leadership and capacity building for NGOs; execution of projects in several sectors (e.g. road construction, water schemes, bridges and livestock production); sensitisation of groups to cash and food crop farming; livestock production for groups; resource mobilisation and agricultural techniques for groups; credit schemes to groups.	Construction of primary schools, community halls, extension to water supply systems, bridge building in some divisions of the province; educational fora and school saving schemes; educating girls through the provision of essential books; nutrition programmes and school garden projects; sustainable primary health care (vaccination and sensitization); financed 21 water supply projects; other projects under consideration.
<b>African Development Foundation</b>		Supported more than 100 micro-projects. Monthly news to farmers in the Farmers' Voice Newspaper; mobilised more than 2.5 million FCFA (credits) and more than 2 million FCFA (as savings).
<b>Support Service to Grassroots Development Initiatives (SAILD)</b>		Working with more than 191 women's and 179 men's groups; set up a multi-shop to market farmers' products and sales to farmers at moderate prices.

Source: Authors' fieldwork (2006).

from the strenuous and time-consuming task of trekking over long distances to fetch water. Helvetas recently commissioned two large water projects in Guzang-Batibo and Kishong-Bui divisions with the communities contributing their share in cash as well as local materials and labour. The Guzang local community contributed about 6 million FCFA to defray the costs of rehabilitation of the water project (The Post, 2002). Recipient communities of Helvetas' water projects participated in the excavation of the pipes and the provision of sand, stones and gravel. World Bank (1990, 1999) has noted the representativeness of NGOs. They often have close links with poor communities by rekindling community participation. This is the case with international organisations like Plan and Helvetas who have demonstrated a strong posture against poverty since their activities touch on the livelihood of the needy and vulnerable populations.

### **NGOS AND GENDER MAINSTREAMING**

In the past fifteen years, poverty has remained a household curse in Cameroon and women constitute the most vulnerable group. According to UNDP (1998), about 51% of the Cameroonian population live in households whose incomes are below the poverty line of US\$ 1 (one dollar) per day. International NGOs are more responsive to integrating gender within their development agenda than national NGOs, given the pervading poverty situation amongst rural women. From the study, it was noticed that SAILD, Plan, HELVETAS and HPI were the most conscious of gender targeting in their outreach activities. They address practical gender needs (PGNs) and attempt to handle strategic gender needs (SGNs) of women and men. By reducing women's workloads at home through the provision of basic needs like food, health care and water, women have more time to try and meet their long-term SGNs. SAILD facilitates access to credit through the NOWEFOR credit house. Women are trained in the manufacture of soap, detergents and skin lotions. They also buy at subsidised prices (bulk buying discounts) from NOWEFOR's one shop that provide women with essential commodities like soap, rice, flour, palm oil and detergents (Table 4). Women's immediate needs are addressed and they are also assisted to generate income through the opening of savings accounts from a share of the seed money granted groups as credit. By meeting the PGNs of women, SAILD and HPI emphasize the integration of more women in farmer groups thereby indirectly redressing the concerns of men since PGNs are shared by all household members but only identified as being in the women's domain because they assume full responsibility for them. SAILD insists on women owning land. Women are trained on how to acquire land and SAILD negotiates purchases on their behalf. Obtaining landed property is a major step towards meeting SGNs. Through NOWEFOR, approximately 5,234 farmers are members of the organization, which comprises of 15 unions, 283

groups, 3,808 women and 1,426 men. As of July 1998, the NOWEFOR credit house had mobilised 2.106.600 FCFA for credit and 1.292.600 FCFA as savings. (SAILD Annual reports, 1996; 1988-89). The World Bank report (1996) notes; 'getting small amounts of money quickly into the hands of poor people can make the critical difference in their capacity to start and sustain productive and much needed businesses'.

The socio-cultural integration of women is highly encouraged by Plan. Communities are encouraged to vote more women into village development committees that identify the development needs of entire communities that have been done previously. They are also encouraged to participate in the planning, design, implementation and evaluation of completed and ongoing projects. Until 2000, Plan International was working with 30 communities and 7,817 foster children in the Momo, Boyo and Ngoketunjia divisions respectively of the NWP (Country Growth Plan FY 99; FY2000). Plan tackles deepening poverty through efforts to minimize subordination, marginalisation and cultural barriers that affect the development of women and girls. Plan is committed through its principle of gender equity to promote equal opportunities by positively discriminating for girls and eradicating gender-based inequities and ensuring access to and control over community resources. It prioritizes women's livelihoods, capacity building, and child and maternal survival, and addresses women's PGNs by promoting health and educating mothers. Their food security and poverty alleviation programmes ensure that female beneficiary groups have a minimum of 60% female membership. Plan's basic education programme ensures that special emphasis is placed on the education of girls through the school savings scheme and provision of essential books. This helps in countering the imbalances and biases in female education.

### **NGOS AND WOMEN'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC UPLIFT**

HPI, AWICO AND SAILD have been instrumental in efforts to uplift the urban poor and rural women in the NWP. HPI and AWICO, with their bottom up approach have been at the forefront of integrating women in livestock development and socio-economic improvement through financial independence. According to the World Bank (1996), many NGOs in Africa have demonstrated a comparative advantage over conventional government institutions in delivering services to the urban and rural poor and other disadvantaged groups especially women. This is done through technical support for agriculture, livestock production, home craft and training in simple farm and financial management techniques.

The Association of Women's Information and Coordination Offices (AWICO) has as motto- 'make we join hand, one hand no fit tie bundle'- that is, let us put our resources together for unity is strength. It has Women's Information and Coordination Offices (WICOs) in Ndop,

Batibo and Bamenda which coordinate the activities of women's groups in the divisions. AWICO enjoys the support of HELVETAS in their outreach programmes on awareness rising for the active participation of underprivileged rural women in village structures and associations. The overall goal of this organisation is to promote and support women in groups, improve their living standards and livelihood strategies through training, sensitisation meetings and income generating activities. Women's groups are supported through training in group management and information exchanges to overcome obstacles in the prerequisites for obtaining loans from formal financial institutions. The socio-economic status of women is improved through instruction in soap making, food and nutrition, record keeping, group management techniques and leadership and capacity building for group leaders. Training courses are also organised on a regular basis on special topics such as home management, soil conservation and improvement, crop protection and food preservation. AWICO implements specific women's projects in the domain of agriculture, small business, food processing and marketing. Major group activities including pig farming, mixed cultivation focusing on yellow yam, sweet potato, maize, beans, soyabeans and the cultivation of vegetables and condiments in gardens. It also assists groups by providing machines for example to process garri. They run corn mills and are involved in cooperative businesses like wholesale and retail buying of palm oil and basic necessities like soap. AWICO is also involved in bee keeping and trading through the North West Bee Farmers Association (NOWEBA) (AWICO Annual reports, 1999/2000). All of these activities have a direct effect on women's socio-economic upliftment as they can obtain basic income from their entrepreneurial activities. Women have taken up activities like food vendors, buying of food stuffs from rural markets to resell in peri-urban and urban markets. In spite of these strides, the organisation has inadequate funds and too few vehicles, which make it impossible to reach certain groups during the wet season.

HPI's expertise in involving women in the management of livestock is marvellous in the province. A study conducted by Akob et al. (1998) show that the participation of women in HPI Cameroon projects in North-west Province had increased from 144 in 1990 to 1,380 in 1996. Prior to HPI assistance, the study showed that 70% of the women were only involved in crop production, 27% in mixed farming and 3% exclusively in livestock production. After six years of HPI assistance with livestock management, 98% of women attest that their overall welfare had improved significantly (Akob et al., 1998; HPI Annual report, 2000-2001). HPI adopts 'Women in Livestock Development' (WILD) as its principal approach to its rural development livestock programmes worldwide. HPI mitigates high female farmer illiteracy barrier through village based training courses, the use of farmer leaders and contact farmers in training programmes and the use of pidgin

English as the medium of instruction to bridge the communication gap. 75% of women farmers interviewed indicated that rabbits, chickens, guinea pigs, pigs and goats rearing near their homes were providing them with protein. They noted that these domestic animals entailed low rearing costs and serve as household food. 65% of the respondents indicated that their families were sustained on the additional income accruing from the sale of small animals while waste from animals provided manure for soil enrichment which increases yields of food crops such as maize, beans and cocoyam. A notable activity is the practice of vegetable gardening in the dry season mainly done with the use of animal dung. Such gardens are common in swampy areas and near streams to permit easy watering.

Most women in the study areas (65%) indicated that in spite of economic hardship, they manage their families by satisfying their nutritional needs, paying school fees, participating in community development projects, buying improved seeds, farm implements and tackling health problems. Some women farmers even reported that they had purchased land. As noted by the World Bank (1990), improving women's productivity through livestock projects can contribute to overall socio-economic growth and poverty reduction since the benefits are felt directly. In HPI's 'Passing on the Gift' programme which focuses on pigs and goats, pigsties and enclosures are visited and training sessions organised on proper husbandry management. A contract is then signed with HPI and the farmer passes on that same breed of the animal after delivery to another group through HPI. Although these approaches are diverse, they have economically empowered rural women in the fight against poverty.

### **STATE LEGISLATION AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS OF NGOS IN A LIBERALISED CONTEXT**

An efficient state administration gives rise to civil associations but this is not the case in Cameroon. Instead, the state is grappling with the emergence of civil society with many actors that collaborate in development. African political systems seldom whole-heartedly welcome the growth of civil society since it implies an inadequate state and reduces opportunities for patronage on which Cameroonian politics is based and contested (Nyamnjoh, 2002; Sandberg, 1994). Whaites (1998:201) remarks, "it is the weakness of the state, its failure to provide services or to engage in local development process that has stimulated a thriving voluntary sector, and with it a strong and vocal civil society". In the context of this study, NGOs are social development actors outside the realm of the state, political society and are involved in activities and practices to improve on the welfare of the population. Among the diverse organisations that make up civil society, NGOs are now often regarded as key intermediaries in development. A discourse of state and civil society's co-responsibility for social welfare pervades neo-liberalism's

recent quest to establish partnership with NGOs. Alvarez's (1998) study of Latin American feminist NGOs reveals that the 1990s witnessed a boom in NGOs specialising in gender policy assessment, project execution and social services delivery; propelling them into public prominence while increasingly diverting them from earlier, more movement-oriented activities. It can be argued that the strengthening of civil society and especially financial support to local NGOs will make them more pro-actively transparent, efficient and accountable to citizens. The state should provide the environment to permit civil society actors and the voluntary sector to flourish. This will lead to greater sustainability in the development work of civil society.

Due to weaknesses in civil society, NGOs are increasingly carving a niche for themselves. Civil society in general and NGOs in particular, take on "the responsibilities now eschewed by neo-liberalism as shrinking state" (Alvarez, 1998). According to Hulme and Edwards (1997), NGOs have a long history of providing welfare services to poor people in countries where governments have lacked the resources to ensure universal provision in health and education; the difference is that now they are seen as the preferred channel for service provision, a deliberate substitute for the state. From our study, this is true of international NGOs like Plan, Helvetas and HPI who have adequate resources, have a professional cadre of personnel and have focused on service provision. Their task is facilitated by the spirit of community participation which is an important ingredient for development in NWP as previously outlined.

With the enactment of the 1990 'liberty' laws on freedom of association, the state put in place the machinery to regulate the activities of the growing NGO sector in Cameroon. Bernstein et al. (1992) note that NGOs are influenced by some of the same social forces and subject to state regulation through laws and financing arrangements. In the interim poverty reduction strategy paper for Cameroon (2000), it was observed that the fight against poverty should involve all social agents including the poor themselves. This can only be effectively managed in the context of a well-conceived partnership involving the state, NGOs, civil society, other development partners and the private sector. Based on our study, it is evident that this partnership is being forged with the legislation to govern NGOs. Law No. 99/014 containing 36 sections and promulgated in December 1999 sets the stage for the policy framework of NGOs. The potential of the law is its recognition of NGOs as partners in development by the state. There is a legal framework for the organisation and functioning of NGOs and the delineation of their scope in terms of actions. The law refers to NGOs as "any duly declared association or any foreign association authorised in accordance with the laws in force and approved by the administration to participate in the execution of missions of general interest especially in the economic, social, cultural, sports, educational or humanitarian sectors".

Credible NGOs are differentiated from other associations by at least three years of contribution in the execution of missions of general interest. Other important points about the law include the registration and approval of NGOs, the monitoring of NGOs by a Technical Commission at the Ministry of Territorial Administration, financing of NGOs which may come from donations and legacies as well as subsidies from corporate bodies governed by public law. State support for NGOs is in the form of tax relief and other exoneration in accordance with the law in force as concerns exemptions. To counter mismanagement and corruption, the law states that, "any manager or member of an NGO found guilty of embezzling funds belonging to or destined for the said NGO shall be punished as provided for by the penal code".

In spite of some good provisions in the law, state responsibility vis-à-vis development partners are not well defined. There is no effective platform for sound collaboration and direct state support to these development partners. Bernstein et al. (1992) are of the view that the state may come to depend on the work of NGOs to extend its reach into the countryside. A critical look at Law No. 99/014 shows that the regulatory and facilitating role of the state is mentioned ambiguously in section 7(1), which states that "a commission hereinafter referred to as the commission responsible for the technical study of approval of application and for monitoring the activities of NGOs is hereby set up". Though the section streamlines the monitoring role of the technical commission, the *modus operandi* has not yet been affected. Due to the centralization of the technical commission, NGO activities still lack scrutiny since the provincial commissions are still to be created. The coordinating role of the state is emphasized in the interim poverty reduction strategy paper. The report notes that the state, civil society and NGO relations are gradually being strengthened to help develop synergies that are indispensable to the struggle against poverty. However, the mechanism of coordination and the responsibility of the state in strengthening these development actors are not clearly stated. There is no commitment to the financing of NGOs by the state; which is why most local NGOs suffer from funding problems. Other shortcomings of the law include the over-centralisation of control by the Ministry of Territorial Administration, which leads to unnecessary bureaucracy and delays. Based on field experience, it would be appropriate to decentralise the Technical Commission charged with the monitoring and control of the activities of NGOs. Such devolution would permit the creation of 'commissions' at the provincial level enabling more regular monitoring of the activities of NGOs. The absence of a code of conduct for NGOs, a prerequisite for building democratic governance and accountability is also fundamental. Such a code would seek to establish precedents that protect the credibility of NGOs and encourage donor support. Forje (1999) noted that civil society in Cameroon has been confronted with problems of political apathy, a lack

of organization, little sense of direction and weak leadership. He adds that, civil society should play a role in balancing state monopoly over resource mobilisation and allocation and in decentralising developmental responsibilities to local institutions.

NGOs and the state are battling to minimize the effect of the economic downturn in Cameroon. Carroll (1992) affirms that NGOs are seen as legally sanctioned civil organisations providing services and support to local grass-root groups in disadvantaged communities and/or engaging in research and advocacy. Against the backdrop of liberalisation, many local and international NGOs are prompting state action by initiating development-oriented activities. However, the relationship between these development agents and the state is still in an embryonic state. The flexible approach adopted by NGOs is often in marked contrast with the bureaucratic and top-down management approach of the state. Lebon (1996) in her study of Brazilian feminist activists noted that they earn their living through 'movement work' within more formal organisations including NGOs; thus combining activism and a professional career. She argues that the challenges presented by the creation of NGOs with regard to issues of representation and participation will ultimately influence the potential of the movement for social change. In the context of Cameroon, the relationship between the state and NGOs is not vibrant considering some of the lapses in the 1999 law. The lack of commitment, funding and institutional support to local NGOs that are adept in service provision is worrying.

There is need for proper regulation and cooperation between the state and NGOs so that local NGOs with viable projects can be supported in their outreach activities. Some local NGOs like SIRDEP and AWICO lack the resources to penetrate deep into NWP. By way of contrast, the state has a good working relationship with some international NGOs like Plan International and Helvetas. This is noticed through the signing of protocol agreements and development accords which makes NGOs more effective and permits the execution of some projects with government's support and contribution. Such agreements give the NGOs greater leverage and a strong institutional backup. This is concretized through high media coverage of their activities.

## CHALLENGES FOR NGOS

International and local NGOs are struggling to harness resources at the grassroots to reduce poverty. Yenshu (1998) contend that in comparison to international NGOs, indigenous NGOs often lack competent, well-trained human resources, though the few qualified persons tend to be dedicated and committed to the goals of their respective organisations. However, indigenous NGOs have much to emulate from their international counterparts in areas of technical expertise, project management and utilization of funds. Nonetheless, the quality of local NGOs

stems from their resourcefulness and determination to promote equitable rural development in Cameroon. Yenshu (1998) also note that financing remains a major constraint for most local NGOs to enable them to strengthen their capacity and to secure additional funding for specific development activities. Most heads of local NGOs indicated that they were negatively affected by either a lack of funds or the long time that donors took to disburse funds. This stifles both the implementation of new projects, and the sustainability of ongoing projects such as water projects and community schools.

This scenario was found in Alvarez's (1998) study of feminist NGOs in Latin America. She observes that while many feminist NGOs continue to struggle to provide advice, to promote consciousness-raising and promote gender policies, the material resources and political rewards are scantily available. In these circumstances, most NGOs can only offer technical advisory services. Unlike many international NGOs that benefit from constant funding, local NGOs are often not involved in certain projects after their life span due to a lack of funds. In extreme situations, the staffing levels are cut and NGOs may fold up when funds do not cover running costs. Unsurprisingly, Green and Mathias (1997) argue that a disadvantage that NGOs face in comparison with the public sector is the high degree of fragility of their sources of revenue.

Evidence from the study indicates that some international NGOs are paternalistic and follow the dictates of donors and will not implement projects that are not within the ambit of the donor policies. This has led to projects of low priority to communities being executed. In Ngoketunja division, some localities expressed reservations with Plan International where a school project was considered ideal but was not the priority project of the community which wanted roads and pipe-borne water. The insistence on specific projects by donors hampers the bridge-building potential of NGOs as it is perceived as ignoring the needs of communities. A survey by the British government in 1995 revealed that 80% of British NGOs surveyed opposed aid being channelled directly to Southern NGOs because that they felt they lacked the experience to manage, monitor and evaluate projects, would be more vulnerable to donor influence, would respond to the availability of money rather than need, would fill a void created by a retrenching state and would be susceptible to manipulation by donor agencies or political groups (Wheat, 2000). Some local NGOs that are not firmly rooted were observed for executing spontaneous projects in a similar community, usually the community or village of origin of the coordinator. Such sporadic projects executed along tribal lines are most often face-saving and meant to garner support for a local elite who has vested interest. The potential of NGOs as agencies in development is still to be tested. These organisations (especially local ones) have been discredited as they are "often used by the elite as a means of either duping or defrauding credulous and naive rural peoples or form an

easy strategy for the embourgeoisement of a modernist *côterie*" (Yenshu, 1998).

The findings of the study reveal that some international and local NGOs display collaboration in the province and they combine resources together in the implementation of certain projects. For example, Helvetas provides funds for the Cameroon Association for Rural Development (CARD) to carry out feasibility studies, cost estimates for the construction and maintenance of water points in collaboration with village water committees. Helvetas has also sponsored some projects for their local counterparts like AWICO, SIRDEP and HURCLED CENTRE. The international aid system and NGOs like Plan and Helvetas are placing increasing emphasis on forming partnerships with and building the capacity of local NGOs so that they can take on an operational role and serve as valuable elements of civil society required to improve governance (Balogun, 1998; Nyang'oro, 1999). For example, USAID has recently announced its intention to direct its funds away from US NGOs towards local NGOs. Though there is some interaction, the relations between NGOs are strained because they compete over development space. In the Mbengwi locality of Momo division, farmers were reported to be at crossroads over whose agricultural method and techniques to follow since the approaches of NGOs diverge on aspects of animal husbandry, crop cultivation and other farming techniques. There is the case of where in some localities, SIRDEP promoted the use of organic material and SAILD promoted the use of fertilizers in the cultivation of food crops. This confusion can be likened to the NGO sector in South Africa where during the apartheid era, the sector was divided, disorganized and characterised by rivalries, personal and organisational jealousies and poor vision of political transition (Mamphiswana, 1999).

It was realized that some local NGOs are plagued by corruption, inefficiency, tribalistic tendencies and no clear-cut development mission or strategy. For the sake of anonymity, it was noticed that these NGOs without any identity and operating clandestinely, employ staff along family and tribal lines, regardless of their skills and expertise. This type of patronage appears to be responsible for the poor development record of some local NGOs as they indulge in shady deals for personal aggrandizement. The consequences are inefficiency, poor management, lack of accountability and incompetence. Some local NGOs have disappeared and some are at the brink of collapse. Most new NGOs have a weak implementation capacity and lack adequate management systems at all levels from financial management to planning, monitoring and evaluation systems (Fox, 1993). Many of these NGOs have no full-time staff or permanent offices. They operate on a voluntary basis and are funded largely by member contributions. These mushroom NGOs run make-shift/mobile offices with undemocratic structures. They could not volunteer any information but it was observed that it is a 'one man show' and management restricted to individual diktat. Some have duped individuals and communities with fake claims of canvassing for development funds and processing of dossiers for those

seeking to travel abroad. Some NGOs operate from hide-outs and others from residential abodes with no basic equipment, the *sine qua non* for effective functioning.

Many of these problems mentioned above may be explained partly due to the lack of a self-regulatory code of ethics for NGOs and a weak monitoring mechanism for the activities of NGOs. The liberal law of association, the lack of standards within the NGO community and the shift of donors away from government toward voluntary sector activities have led many to suspect "NGOs" as in fact small businesses or consulting firms rather than genuine NGOs working on a not-for-profit-basis to assist community groups or raise public consciousness on development issues. Donors report that other new NGOs have become oriented to the "international conference and per diem culture" (World Bank 1994). Due to the credibility problem for the NGO community, some donors are moving from supporting NGOs to directly supporting community-based organisations (CBOs), alleging that NGOs "eat" too much money in administrative expenses, including well-paid staff and modern equipments (ironically, often required by donors who want more professional administration of programmes they support) (World Bank, 1994). Mwansa (1995) states that the lack of a clear definition of the relationship between NGOs and states in social development in Africa, has led to uncontrolled, uncoordinated and ineffective participation of NGOs in social development. A more detailed look at *a priori* projects executed in the province (Table 4) shows that international NGOs have the potential for greater efficiency in service provision. Some of the reasons for successful execution of projects include the fact that they are focused, have adequate funds with appropriate management structures, and increased provincial representation. In addition, they are flexible, sustainable and have disposition for staff motivation. These ingredients are either rare or virtually absent with local NGOs. International NGOs have become conduits of development assistance from donors and their ability to reach the poor especially in inaccessible and landlocked areas of the province.

However, these NGOs can increase their outreach activities by cutting down on huge staff salaries in order to recruit extra hands. It was realized that the topography of the province renders most of the rural areas impenetrable; local NGOs should request for four-wheel drive vehicles that will enable them get to remote areas especially during the wet season. Local NGOs like AWICO, ACDEP indicated as handicap, the inability of meeting with groups and farmers, especially during the wet season due to the bad roads.

## Conclusion

It is evident from the study that some international and human and local resource mobilisation, delivering technical expertise, financial support and attempts at capacity building. Results indicate that international NGOs are better placed at fostering capacity building needed to

guarantee the sustainability of projects. They are also involved in small and large-scale projects geared at poverty alleviation, socio-economic empowerment of women and efforts at gender mainstreaming tailored to improving the welfare and livelihood of the population.

Within the state-civil society framework, the efforts of NGOs are uncoordinated. Some international NGOs that have a good rapprochement with the state could shortlist local NGOs that are committed to grassroots development as partners. This will foster a climate of collaboration and partnership in the short and long runs.

Against the backdrop of an economic downturn and the declining role of the state as a major development agent, NGOs can fill gaps by reinforcing and strengthening the capacities of communities to fully participate in their own development.

Increased reliance on handouts from international agencies and donors would be reduced by a greater involvement and increased reliance of communities on their own resources. This is in line with the rights-based approach now promulgated as the foundation for development that shifts the conceptualization of communities and poor people from 'beneficiaries' to legitimate 'claimants'. In other words, there is already a mainstream movement from 'needs to rights'. (de Gay Fortman and Goldweijk, 1998; UNDP, 1998). The state has to play its role as an arbiter ensuring that groups and their representation within civil society are adequately regulated, monitored and supported. Such a move would enable government to take actions consequent on the performance of NGOs. It would also strengthen state-NGOs relations making it more dynamic and collaborative.

The prospects for development cooperation are immense if NGOs take into cognizance the interests of the poor. Therefore, communities should be considered as stakeholders in the development process and not mere beneficiaries. This will render both international and local NGOs more accountable, open and proactive in service provision. As NGOs fight over the development space in north-western Cameroon, there is need for international and local NGOs to foster a strong partnership with local government organizations like municipal councils and village development associations. This will give greater impetus for community actions and stimulate citizen participation and the involvement of target groups as well as beneficiaries in programme design and implementation which now points to be the most promising way of ensuring sustainable development.

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