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**Author/s: EKPE INYANG
PHILIP FORBOSEH
TANGE MAURICE**

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Indigenous Systems and Practices in Community-managed Development Initiatives: A Case of Cameroon

EKPE INYANG*

Capacity Building Advisor
WWF Cameroon Programme Office

PHILIP FORBOSEH

Coastal Forests Programme Manager
WWF Cameroon Programme Office

TANGE MAURICE

Development Advisory Specialist
Francophone African Management Services Company

*Corresponding author: ainyang@yahoo.com

Abstract: Increasing poverty and persistent economic crises in Cameroon have made life so precarious that even communities that once depended solely on the Government for answers to their development problems can no longer wait for external intervention. This can be seen from the proliferation of Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) and the rapid increase in the number of economic and development-oriented projects and initiatives managed by communities or community groups. This paper highlights some of Cameroon's indigenous practices that could be integrated into Plan's corporate planning, management, and monitoring and evaluation system, in order to achieve more efficiency and guarantee sustainability in the organisation's community development efforts.

Keywords: Indigenous systems and practices, community management systems, community-managed development initiatives, cultural associations, njagi groups, micro-finance institutions, resource mobilisation

Introduction

Cameroon is blessed with a wealth of natural and human resources but remains one of the poorest and least developed countries in Africa (Inyang 2005a). The increasing poverty and persistent economic crises in the country have made life so difficult and precarious that even communities that hitherto would have depended almost entirely on the Government for answers to their development problems can no longer wait for external intervention. This is evidenced by the proliferation of NGOs, MFIs, CS, CBOs, CIGs, and CAs (UNDP 2000), on the one hand, and a rapid increase in the number of economic and development-oriented projects and initiatives managed by communities or community groups, on the other hand. This underscores the fact that communities are conscious of not just securing a livelihood but doing it in a sustainable manner. Cognisant of their prevailing conditions and circumstances, they have pooled their strengths and created a solid capital base (social capital) on which to build in harnessing other essential capitals for sustainable livelihood.

Community-managed projects or initiatives refer to those initiated and largely or entirely managed by communities. They range from infrastructure to non-infrastructure types, aimed principally at addressing the educational, health, transport, socio-economic and politico-cultural needs and concerns of the community. These are often managed using indigenous knowledge, structures and practices with little or no external influence.

This paper presents an analysis of community project management systems and practices in Cameroon, drawing on nine case studies (three each from the East, Centre and North West provinces) and focusing on project identification, planning and resource mobilisation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation, with a view to highlighting some indigenous practices that seem to account for the generally observed success of community managed projects. The essence is to inform the integration of indigenous systems and practices into Plan corporate planning, management, and monitoring and evaluation system, in line with UNESCO and Euro-African Management Consult's (1997) idea of Africanisation or indigenisation of modern management practices for the much needed socio-economic development and sustainable growth in Africa.

Methodology

The research was conducted in two phases: the survey phase for project identification and selection, and case study phase for detailed studies of selected projects. During the survey phase, a total of thirty communities – ten from the North West Province, twelve from the Centre Province and eight from the East Province (see Appendix 2) – were studied from 26th June to 9th July 2006, using semi-structured interviews.

Based on set criteria (see Table 1), nine projects – drawn from communities which represented the three provinces and included – those with no NGO intervention, those with communities with NGO intervention but not Plan, and those communities where Plan worked (see Table 3) – were selected and studied in great detail from 17 to 29 July 2006, using key informant interviews, focus group interviews, documentary reviews and field observations, where necessary.

The data gathered from each community were synthesised in a report and presented to an assembly of the key informants, focus group members, and other interested community members for validation. The validated data provided the basis for the writing of case studies which were then subjected to content analysis described by Gillham (2000) and Inyang (2005b).

Table 1: Project selection criteria

Infrastructure projects	Non-infrastructure projects
• Status: completed or ongoing	• Duration
• Frequency of project	• Balance between social & economic interest
• Extent of coverage of the different stages of the project cycle	-
• Clear link with indigenous knowledge and cultural practices	• Clear link with indigenous knowledge and cultural practices
• Impact on the community	• Impact on the community

Table 2: Communities studied during the survey phase

Programme Unit	Community with no NGO	Community with NGO but not Plan	Plan Community
<i>North West</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balikumbat • Baligasın • Njaah • Acha Tungi • Njinikejem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ngyen-Mbo • Babanki 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balikumbit • Bambilang • Bamessing
<i>Biteng</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mvom • Meve Memboto • Akak • Abem • Meyo Mekombo • Zalom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Minkomilala • Medzek 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bekoue • Abam • Mve I & II
<i>Eastern</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Zome • Mbami II • Kak • Kambelle II 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Anguengue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Kanyol II • Mboma • Kpwangala

Table 3: Projects studied during case study phase

Programme Unit	Category of community	Infrastructure	Non infrastructure	Community	Division/sub division
Northwest	Non Plan community but other NGO	-	Nkamtu / Njangi	Njinikejem	Belo Sub Division
	Community with no NGO	Water Project	-	Bambili	Tubah Sub Division
	Plan Community	-	Apuakanu / Njangi	Bambalang	Ngoketunjia
Central	Community with no NGO	-	Sangulu/njangi	Abem	Endom
	Non-Plan community but with other NGO	Road construction	-	Minkomilala	Awae
	Plan Community	School	-	Abam	Dzeng
East	Community with no NGO	-	Njangi / ARA	Kambele II	Batouri
	Non Plan Community other NGO	School	-	Anguengue	
	Plan Community	School	-	Kagnol II	

Findings

The findings are presented and discussed in two parts. The first highlights community management systems and practices identified within each project phase and the evolution over time. The second attempts to bring out the differences, if any, amongst the three categories of communities studied with a view to indicating whether or not NGOs, particularly Plan, had any significant influence on community management systems and practices.

Community-managed Systems and Practices in Various project phases

Project Identification

Communities in Cameroon, as elsewhere, are generally faced with a multiplicity of problems and concerns, each with a number of potential

solutions. Identifying the solution that best addresses a given problem within the context of a particular community has remained a puzzling exercise to government agencies and Non-Governmental Organisations around the globe. This could be ascribed to lack of knowledge of cultural values and strategies that would instil a sense of project ownership in the community.

It should be noted that the search for ethnic and cultural identity remains a driving force in efforts to improve life in rural communities (Nkwi 1997). We must, therefore, expect at least some differences in the development management practices amongst communities in Cameroon, given the multiplicity and diversity of culture, even though this study has revealed patterns that suggest that these are generally similar. An essential factor in project success, according to Hannah (1992), is the application of a development approach that is appropriate to local conditions. For instance, this study has shown that community or group initiatives were based on the ideas of individuals – often external elites for infrastructure projects that concerned the entire community and home-based elites or non-elites for non-infrastructure projects that involved interest groups. It could be argued that this practice might encourage situations where initiatives or projects were more or less modelled to satisfy individual rather than collective interest. For instance, the Bambili Water Project was based on an idea proposed by an elite who badly needed a pipe-borne water system to run his modern house. Although this was primarily the reason behind his push for the project, it soon became clear that it was also to address the problems of water shortages and water-borne diseases faced by the community. Despite the numerous problems associated with the economic crises that had also seriously hit the elite in Cameroon, they had remained committed to the improvement of the quality of life in their home villages (Nkwi 1997). In other words, they were aware of their responsibility to act as agents of change and would make their people want what they needed (Pitt 1976). The positive role of traditional titles and decorations also must have been an added incentive for their commitment.

It is a general practice amongst the communities studied that although individuals identified the initiatives these were normally

discussed and debated in informal settings and formal community meetings where they were either discarded by minority vote or approved by popular support. This supports Beugré and Offodile's (2001) assertion that in Africa decision-making was through obtaining consensus and through a system of checks and balances against autocratic rule. It should be noted that individuals would normally subscribe to an initiative if it was in their own best interests and, as Mbigi, cited in Beugré and Offodile (2001) notes, were free to express dissension. What this means is that interesting community projects such as the Abam Community School project in Centre Province would have easily been dismissed as unnecessary on the basis merely of unpopular support. In such situations, however, the use of a top-down approach, principally to guard against people taking the wrong decisions or making choices that were not of general community interest in the long run seemed to be an unavoidable option.

The case studies display a general pattern that could lead to the conclusion that the approaches of project identification by the communities were somewhere between the top-down and bottom-up continuum. This situation allows for flexibility in the selection and adaptation of methods to accommodate prevailing circumstances and conditions in communities, as espoused by Hannah (1997). The strategies fit her definition of effective project methods as referring to those that are seldom found at the extremes on the continuum between the two conventional approaches. Such methods have the added advantage that they are neither too democratic nor too autocratic.

Planning and Resource Mobilisation

Resources (human, material and financial) are critical to the success of any project, and resource mobilisation is perhaps the most difficult task in project management. This study has revealed a broad range of methods that communities in Cameroon employ in project planning and mobilisation of resources for their infrastructure and non-infrastructure projects.

Mobilising resources for non-infrastructure projects (group farming and *njangi* or thrift and loan) that involved small interest groups seemed to be less difficult and more straightforward than mobilising resources

for infrastructure projects (schools, health centres, roads, bridges, water supply, etc.) that more or less belonged to entire communities. For non-infrastructure projects, group members started by engaging in some kind of planning, discussing what it entailed to execute the project, in the case of group farms, or how much each member would contribute, in the case of *njangis*. The efficacy of this practice is discernible in the aphorism that “proper planning prevents poor performance.” The existence of this practice in communities in Cameroon is in sharp contrast with Jaeger’s (1986) observation that planning in developing countries was non-existent or based simply on precedence. However, this misconception was possibly based on the fact that the issue of time was not given serious consideration in the community planning practice; hence it was possible to know when, for instance, an infrastructure project was likely to start and not when it would end.

In the case of group farms, sizeable pieces of land, planting materials and labour were the key resources required. Acquiring a piece of land seemed to be the most difficult part of the project, as the group might need to apply to the village head who had the mandate and traditional authority to give out communal land. The success of this arrangement, however, depends on a number of factors including inter alia, availability of land, credibility of the group or its members within the community, and understanding and supportiveness of the village head and other influential members of the community. It was, perhaps, in realisation of the difficulty involved in acquiring the indispensable resource through this means that the president of Apuakanu decided to donate his own land to the group. This gesture seemed to be based also on the understanding by members of the importance of the project and, perhaps, also on the conviction that it would succeed. However, such a practice, depending on the nature of the agreement, could give the land donors undue hegemony over the other group members to the extent that dictatorship might set in and disrupt the group. On the other hand, acquiring land from the village would have placed the members on an equal position in terms of rights and ownership, as well as instilled in them a sense of accountability, although there was also the danger of undue interference. Kamugo (1982) has observed that political interference in the management of organisations was widely known to contribute to organisational failure.

There was no special effort in mobilising labour for routine work during the course of group farming, as the whole essence of forming the group seemed to be well understood to mean pooling labour in order to increase productivity. An added incentive for adopting this practice could be linked to the South African concept of *ubuntu* that is built on the assumption that people become people only through other people (Pitt 1976). In addition to the direct economic motivation behind group farming, Inyang (2002) also finds the arrangement to be geared towards addressing the ecological problem of crop raiding by wild animals, a phenomenon that has obvious socio-economic implications. The strength of this practice lays in the fact that group members shared common interest, and were often guided by a set of rules and regulations to ensure good behaviour and responsibility. Moreover, the very fact that the members directly benefited from the collective effort provided great incentive for increased commitment.

The study discovered that group farming members, with Apuakanu farming group as a good example, sometimes mobilised planting materials through financial contributions. There was usually a discussion forum to decide how much each member could conveniently contribute, in order to relax the tension of some members not knowing where to get the money. To further simplify matters, some farming groups had special *njangis* where savings were made to help members take loans during times of financial predicaments. This helped reduce the possibility of delay in procuring planting materials, a situation which could work against the planting season and, therefore, result in poor yields.

The system of mobilising funds to enable group members to purchase planting materials was similar to that of making contributions in *njangi* groups. The subscription amounts were agreed upon through participatory discussions, with due account taken of the financial strength of the members. This ensured that every member could afford, and therefore reduce the possibility of failure. Again, there were special savings where members could take loans to fulfil their subscription obligations. In some exceptional cases, such as Apuakanu, some members loaned money to those who needed help, as part of their commitment to the success of one another. This was to ensure that each

member was able to raise the expected amount to accomplish their individual projects. Beugré and Offodile (2001) explain that a need for security in the face of hardship has provided an incentive for commitment to help one another. According to him, this value is likely not based merely on simple exchange but seems to be a result of a network of social obligations based predominantly on kinship. The absence of such collaborative spirit, however, would have rendered the practice futile, characterised by a high number of cases of failure by members and the attendant fines, with an equally high possibility of disintegration and collapse of such groups.

Mobilisation of resources for infrastructure projects was either done through special structures (such as committees) set up for such projects or through the village governance system. In the former arrangement, the committees took the responsibility of making cost estimates of the projects and determined levies to be paid by individuals or amount to be raised through launching. By this time, the approval of the village head would have been obtained. An announcement about the deadline for payment of the levies or launching date was usually made by a village crier, on the instruction of the village head. In the case of launching, this was followed by letters of appeal addressed to well-to-do members or elites of the community whose greatest reward, according to Nkwi (1997), was honour, prestige and the possibility of political capital. Levies were either collected by selected members of the special committee on a door-to-door basis or through Quarter Heads. Records of participation in and contribution towards community activities were kept and defaulters were sanctioned by the constituted authority within the traditional governance structure. In the same vein, subscribers, especially of large sums, were often publicly announced for due recognition. The strength of these methods lay in the fact that they had the backing of the traditional governance system, and able people, who would have ordinarily defaulted for one reason or another, would normally want to avoid the embarrassment of being exposed and branded as anti-development. However, in the face of growing poverty in the communities, as elsewhere, there was also the danger of punishing people who were genuinely unable to make financial contributions.

Launching had gained popularity as a means of fundraising towards community development projects, due particularly to the difficulty and delay in raising funds through levies. In launching, participants were free to donate whatever they were able to offer, which gave community members equal opportunity in making contributions without undue pressure or strain. However, the pride in giving to be recognised, characteristic of the event, meant that even the not-so-well-to-do individuals would naturally strive to give more than what would have been the normal levy. This phenomenon is lucidly explained by the hypothetical conclusion that motivation to work or make such contributions stemmed also from the need for individual rather than group recognition (Miller 1975; Kanawaty et al 1981; Hofstede 1981; Kamungo 1982). It could, therefore, be inferred that launching simply was a way of giving the affluent elite the rare opportunity of donating sums commensurable with and in confirmation of their status, which considerably reduced the time it would have taken to raise the expected amount.

Project Implementation

Implementation is an exciting moment and, perhaps, the most visible and reassuring aspect of a project. Even after the required resources have been mobilised, one cannot be completely certain until the project has actually begun; that is when community members will have started participating in the activities. As Gardener and Lewis (1996) and Nkwi (1997) assert, community participation is a key prerequisite for sustainability because unless the intended beneficiaries of development interventions participate in the formulation, planning and implementation of projects, thus enabling them to assert or claim ownership, they will have no real interest in making the projects succeed. This clearly explains why development projects induced from outside will inevitably collapse after the initiators withdraw (Nkwi 1997).

This study has revealed a wide array of strategies in the implementation of community projects by communities in Cameroon. For the purpose of convenience, it is best to discuss these separately for *njangis*, and for group farming and infrastructure projects. Generally, implementation of *njangis* was pretty straightforward. Members went to

meetings with their contributions and took turns in contributing and benefiting. This practice had been useful as individuals who had found it extremely difficult to raise adequate funds to embark on major projects such in that house construction and opening of large farms were enabled to venture into these areas of activity. Furthermore, it encouraged members to put more time into economic activities, due particularly to the sort of positive competition stimulated by the system. Some *njangis*, such as Ngamti Tobeh, extended their implementation phase to include follow-up assistance to beneficiaries in the execution of their projects. This was built largely on the spirit of love that characterised the group membership, and was beneficial in that it encouraged mutual support and commitment to the progress of one another. All this contradicts Jaeger's (1986) view that success in developing countries had more to do with the maintenance of the well-being of the group rather than measured in terms of pragmatic results. However, in partial support of the view, the practice was also closely linked to the collective desire to promote the name of the group within the community, as it was usually a source of pride to belong to a group whose members were generally progressive. Left without such arrangements, most community members would normally have committed more of their precious time to leisure and unproductive activities, with the concomitant delay in the development of communities.

Group farming and infrastructure projects had similar implementation strategies, which included general labour, division of labour, execution in phases and sharing of portions. General labour implied that there was no sex or age differentiation in the type of work assigned to participants. A good example was the practice by the Apuakanu farming group in which every member did the same kind of work in each working session. This practice seemed to have been encouraged by the logical understanding that farming is carried out in phases, in accordance with the agricultural calendar, with each phase concentrating on one major activity – clearing, tilling, planting or harvesting. Although the practice served to promote hard-work and equal contribution by all the members, as well as build their capacities, it was apparently a source of strain for some members. This indicates that individuals who could not cope with the situation were forced to

leave the group. Although this was the experience of Apuakanu at the early stages, the remaining continued to participate actively, using this system, because of the benefits they had been enjoying. As Inyang (2005a) posits, participation in an effort is inextricably linked to perceived or tangible short-term and long-term benefits not only to the entire group but also to the individuals. However, such benefits are not the only driving force for participation. For example, as Bunch (1995) postulates, the amount of constructive participation in a programme depends also on the amount of enthusiasm it generates.

Unlike the practice of general labour discussed above, it was commonplace experience for division of labour to be adopted in the implementation of community, particularly, infrastructure projects. A typical example was the Abam Community School project in the Centre Province which gave the men the more difficult tasks of digging and treading of the earth to make mud, while children supplied water and women mudded and plastered the walls, with some playing the rather domestic role of cooking food for all the participants. This practice confirms the significance of socio-cultural roles assigned to community groups (Cernea 1994), with cognisance taken of the fact that certain groups of individuals in a community are more skilled in certain activity areas than in others. The advantage of this practice is that since individuals are assigned roles in their skill areas, it guarantees high performances.

As has been hinted earlier on, group farming was often executed in phases based on the various activities that went with the agricultural calendar. This practice also held true for large infrastructure projects, such as the Bambili Water Project. The adoption of this strategy was informed by the obvious impossibility of executing the entire project at once, which is fairly in line with strategic planning described by Margoluis and Salafsky (1998). Executing projects in phases meant that a large project was broken down into smaller and more manageable projects that could be completed within a relatively short timeframe. In this way there was something tangible to show after every effort, which served as a source of motivation and incentive for continued community participation. Trying to tackle the whole project at once was not only impossible but also meant to spread resources too thin, thus keeping the

results questionably invisible for extended periods of time before they could start manifesting.

Within the phase-based strategy, some community projects were executed using a system of work-sharing amongst quarter heads or lineage, as exemplified by the Kanyob II and Anguengue Community Schools, and Bambili Water Project. This gave quarter heads the singular responsibility of ensuring that their members had turned out *en masse* and were participating actively. The effectiveness of this practice rested in the fact that not only was a traditional authority involved to assist the regular supervisors but the very fact that people knew which portion or task belonged to which quarters was enough incentive for quarter members to vouch for effective collective effort in order to uphold the name of their quarters. This practice was especially important for large communities, as it simplified the arduous task of having to manage extremely large groups.

Animation was an important characteristic of the implementation of group farm and infrastructure projects. In some cases, an animator was selected for each working session, a typical example being the Apuakanu farm group. Generally, members took turns in animating on a rotational basis. This usually took the form of leading in singing, the essence of which was to invigorate the members and spur them on as they worked. It is an established fact that music performed at a high level of intensity gives a feeling of excitement (Key 1995), and could have the added effect of making work lighter by reducing the conscious effort and, therefore, the strain that attends the manual labour.

Monitoring and Evaluation

Conventionally speaking, communities in Cameroon might be considered not to be effective in project monitoring. This could be deduced from the observation that the study communities did not have monitoring plans that clearly showed when and how monitoring would be conducted, what should be monitored and who should be involved in the exercise, as defined by Margoluis and Salafsky (1998). However, this does not imply that they did not carry out monitoring and evaluation at all. There is a pool of evidence to prove that the communities had developed their own systems of monitoring and

evaluation based on their own indigenous knowledge, ideologies and practices, indicating that these strategies were an integral part of the traditional culture.

Community monitoring and evaluation practices identified during the study could be grouped into four broad types, namely participatory monitoring, supervision, inspection and record-keeping. Participatory monitoring, though not applied in the conventional sense, seemed to be a common feature of all types of community infrastructure and, to some extent, non-infrastructure projects in Cameroon. In this strategy, every group or community member was supposed to be part of the monitoring effort, individually or in groups. This was based on the assumption that the projects were in the best interests of every member who should, therefore, take a special interest in seeing that they were properly executed, as was the case with the infrastructure projects. During and immediately after the execution of assigned tasks, participants usually made observations as to whether others were doing or had done their portions effectively. This strategy worked best when community work was shared to groups or quarters, and reports were made secretly to supervisors. Once inefficient work was detected, there was a follow-up for immediate corrective action, in order to save the name of the group or quarters. The force behind this system was possibly the simple fact that certain community members existed who did not want to be associated with poor work or inefficiency, and would do everything to prevent such a scenario. However, the strategy was likely to fail where members were generally afraid of being seen as traitors, on account of having reported members of their groups or quarters. Furthermore, the strategy did not effectively commit the members, and so many cases were likely to go unreported, especially during subsequent follow-up exercises.

Supervision and inspection provide more reliable monitoring strategies. In supervisory monitoring a team was assigned to go round and direct the work, as was the case with the Bambili Water Project. In some cases, as with Anguengue Community School and Apuakanu njangi group, an individual was selected to take on the responsibility, which was often combined with the animation exercise discussed under implementation. The simple knowledge that there was a supervisor who

could detect poor work and mete out sanctions meant that members were compelled to put in their very best in order not to be called back to repeat the work. An added punishment was that they would find themselves working when others had either returned home or were relaxing, over and above the fact that they had been spotted out as inefficient workers. Ngamti Tobeh provided a fascinating and novel monitoring strategy, which, for want of appropriate category, could also be classified under supervisory monitoring. As discussed under project implementation, this was a practice in which *njangi* beneficiaries were assisted in the implementation of their projects rather than given their funds and left to pursue the achievement of their goals on their own. In this way, the assigned group members were guaranteed, and could indeed testify, that the projects had been satisfactorily executed. The arrangement not only ensured that the funds were put into the intended use but also reduced the time and effort that would have been put into routine monitoring.

Inspection was similar to supervision, except that it was done after the work had been completed and could involve people who might not necessarily have been around to see it in progress. This strategy was often applied where communities hired and paid labour to handle the more technical aspects of the project, such as the case with the Bambili water Project. Like supervisors, inspectors were usually in an informed position to decide whether or not the work had been done satisfactorily, which required technical knowledge and familiarity with the terms of reference. Also, as with supervision, the knowledge that there was an inspector who had to approve or disapprove the work was enough incentive for striving to achieve efficiency.

Record-keeping was an important monitoring tool, as it provides an excellent means of keeping track of those who had been or not been participating in the various group or community activities. In the case of *njangi*, the secretaries took on this responsibility, while supervisors or inspectors assumed the role when it came to group farming or infrastructure projects. It should, however, be noted that projects in the East and Centre provinces showed no proof of good record-keeping, except that *njangis* kept minutes, unlike those in the North West province that systematically kept records. Where records were kept,

reports were either made on the spot, as was the case with Apuakanu, or during special meetings following the completion of the activities. It could be inferred that communities considered record-keeping to be extremely important as could be seen from its introduction right from the identification and resource mobilisation phases. The idea behind this was to give a holistic picture of individual contribution and participation towards the realisation of each project. The importance of record-keeping seemed to have been recognised even by communities where people could not read and write. A case in point was Ngamti Tobeh njangi group where traditional methods of record-keeping were employed at the early stages of the group, although these were later replaced by modern methods. There was also the introduction of a modern governance structure (consisting of President, Vice President, Secretary, and Treasurer) to replace the traditional form based on trust vested in a single individual who apparently handled all the executive posts. This trend is reported by Lerner (1964) who articulates the assumption, generally, that there is a continuous evolution from traditional state towards a modernisation goal, following steps similar to those presumed to have been followed by Western industrialised nations. This change in the system of record-keeping was seen as crucial largely on the basis of its more reliable and accurate nature and not on any form of suspicion of foul play, and was an essential practice of the Bambili Water Authority characterised by systematic and efficient record-keeping. The significance of record-keeping can be seen from the fact that it facilitated the tracking down of defaulters for sanctioning as necessary and applicable. Generally speaking, the system also served as guarantee for proper accountability and, therefore, increased a sense of trust and security amongst group or community members.

Differences in Management Systems and Practices amongst Community Types

As has been mentioned earlier, this part attempts a comparative analysis of community management systems and practices among the three categories of communities: those without NGO intervention, those with NGO intervention but not Plan, and those with Plan intervention (which constitute our main variables). However, since we are dealing

with social systems with other multifarious intervening variables (such as the rate of transfer of foreign ideas to the community defined by the rate of migration and influence of elites/government policy within the community, and the rate of assimilation/adoption by the community of foreign ideas defined by facilitating and militating factors including but not limited to communication, openness to new ideas and culture), our analysis of the main variables can only be based on the assumption that the other intervening variables have equal or no impacts on the communities.

A cursory look at the nine case studies (see figure 1) could give the impression that other NGOs had influence on community governance systems while Plan did not have any influence at all. This can be deduced from the simple fact that one out of the three communities of either “no NGO intervention” (Njinikejem) or “Plan intervention” (Bambalang) category had hybrid governance systems while two of the three had traditional systems (Abem and Cambelle communities for “no NGO intervention” category and Abam and Kanyol II community for “Plan intervention” category). The reverse was the case in communities with “NGO intervention” (Minkomilala and Bambili had hybrid systems while Anguengue had a traditional system). However, such a deduction can be misleading because by having a “no NGO intervention” community developing a hybrid system already leads us to find reason also in concluding that other intervening variables play equal or, perhaps, more significant roles in encouraging the development of such systems.

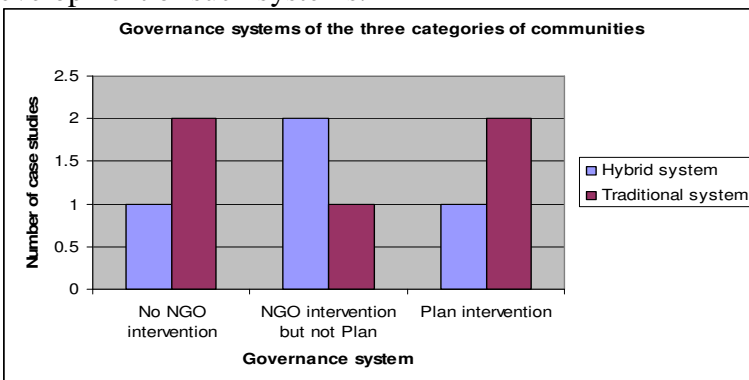


Figure 1: Governance systems of the three categories of communities

It could be concluded, therefore, that other NGOs and Plan had less significant, or no, influence on the governance systems of the communities in which they operated, indicating that they adopted a common strategy of operating more or less within the framework of existing governance systems and practices, without the imposition of any foreign ones on the communities. Any change in such systems and practices could, therefore, be ascribed to other factors. As we have already noted, there is a general continuous evolution from traditional state to modernisation goals (Lerner 1964). What this means is that, left without any direct NGO or Plan intervention, communities would at some point find the need to develop, and are capable of developing or adopting new systems and practices in response to changing circumstances. For example, Ngamti Tobeh njangi group in Njinikejem saw the introduction of a modern structure of governance and of record-keeping following the death of the initiator and the arrival of a literate member.

However, marked differences were discernible between the three categories of communities when considering the level of women and children involvement and participation in community meetings and decision-making. We observed that in communities where either other NGOs or Plan had their interventions, women participated freely in meetings and were, to some extent, part of the community decision-making process, which was not the case in communities where there was no such influence. This is possibly due to the fact that other NGOs and Plan encouraged participatory discussions during meetings, with emphasis on gender balance, and this had gradually become an important practice in targeted communities. On the other hand, communities without such an opportunity had continued to embrace the traditional culture of having women and children silent in community discussions and decisions.

We learnt that even though elites identified and facilitated the implementation of projects that directly addressed problems that affected children (such as water to reduce the burden of children and schools to reduce the distances that children had to trek to attend schools in neighbouring villages), these children were not involved in the identification process, neither were they part of the decision-

making. This was characteristic of “no NGO intervention” or “NGO intervention” communities where children had continued to remain passive, unlike “Plan intervention” communities where children were becoming more and more vocal, demanding for their rights to education by egging on their parents to provide their school needs. This unique experience could be ascribed to the rights based education programme being implemented by Plan, which has the potential also of instilling in the children the spirit of getting involved in community decision-making.

Conclusions and Recommendations

There is a lot to tap from rural communities in Cameroon, and possibly elsewhere, in terms of systems, strategies or practices for effective community project identification, planning and resource mobilisation, implementation, and monitoring and evaluation. However, due to the diversity in culture on which systems which inform the formation of strategies are built, the practices we encounter in the communities may be so complex, site-specific or limited that it might require the development of hybrid systems (that is combining traditional systems with modern ones) in order to render them more useful and applicable on a wider-scale. For instance, the community planning system clearly needs to be upgraded to include and lay more emphasis on time as a significantly important factor in efficient project management.

Some of the community management practices could easily become obsolete in time and space, indicating that there is need either to remove them completely from our list of considerations or replace them with modern equivalents, where hybridisation is practically impossible. For example, the management practice by Ngamti Tobeh that is built purely on the traditional values of love and trust could be gradually replaced by surety or collateral systems, given the likelihood of the values eroding with time, growth of the business, occurrences of crises or structural changes, as well as the obvious irreplicability of the practice.

However, there are other practices (such as the novel monitoring strategy of helping beneficiaries in the execution of their projects, characteristic of the above *njangi* group) which could be maintained

and possibly replicated in other communities, as they had not only worked in their original communities but seem to have the potential to work also in other communities and to stand the test of time. All this highlights the need to encourage the application of adaptive management which Comiskey and Dallmeier (2003) characterise as providing a means by which management practices can be improved through lessons learnt.

Traditional governance and social security systems in the Cameroonian communities have great potential in, and generally show tendency towards, playing catalytic and facilitating roles in the promotion of community initiatives that are seen to be able to contribute to overall community development. Where this is the case, Non-governmental organisations and government agencies should build on such existing systems rather than import new ones, as the latter option may instead constitute a recipe for disaster.

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