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Associational Life between Traditional and Modern Society on the Path to Autonomy and Self-Reliant Development

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On the Viability of Associational Life in Traditional Society and Home-Based Associations

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Introduction

The notion of civil society, which is at the basis of association life, has gained a new lease of life since the end of the Cold War. In Cameroon the emergence of association life was concurrent with the liberalisation process. Although it has been given a new impetus – to the extent that it pervades all facets of national life (Yenshu Vubo 1997) – the concern with association life has been lived as an exclusively modern one. This joins up with a certain Lockean notion of voluntary association life as the 'product of modernity' (Tester 1992:176). In this regard the notion of civil society is inscribed in the 'modern', 'advanced', and 'civilised', versus the 'traditional', 'primitive', 'backward' antimony and the current evangelists of civil society present it as the appropriate instrument in constructing a new society outside of a largely discredited state.

This view abstracts the question of civil society from its real concern. As Tester (op cit. 5) has put it, the question of the civil society 'can best be understood as a confrontation with the very possibility of society itself – this society, our society'. In this regard we come to view civil society as being at the basis of all societies, the necessary framework for a movement from a state of nature to a state of culture. There is an increasing tendency for traditional association life to erupt into the domain of the modern (Ritzenthaler 1960, Ardener 1975, Nkwi 1985, Diduk 1987, 1989, 1998, 2004). Mamdani (1995:612) has also pointed to the restlessness of traditional society in the modern context. In fact, the indigenous organisation of associations has often risen to the surface during critical movements of transition in the modern era, whether we are talking of opposition to colonial rule, the decolonisation process (cf. Ritzenthaler 1960, Nkwi 1985, Diduk 1989, Brey-

tenbach 1998:39) or the post-Cold War attempts at democratisation (Jua 1993, Diduk 2004, see Forchingong et al. in this volume). Association life is also becoming the central feature of economic, social and political life in the rural areas that have remained largely traditional. This can also be observed in the proliferation of ethnic-based associations in the urban areas (Tostensen, Tvedten and Vaa 2001). Although this is proof of the vitality of traditional association life few studies have paid attention to it, and even where there have been attempts, they have been peripheral to the central issues.

Associations with an ethnic base but laying claims to a development role or function have been a very important feature of association life in Cameroon since colonial times. They have been an important, if not the dominant feature, of popular urban life, creating as it were a bridge between urban and rural spheres, on the one hand, and the traditional and the modern, on the other. In the colonial era they articulated so-called tribal interests, initiating what Ebune has styled the improvement unions (Ebune 2004:62-69),[1] and intervened in a decolonisation process controlled entirely by the colonial powers and directed to the protection of the interests of certain groups perceived to be more favourable to eventual neo-colonial interests. These associations survived into the post-colonial period, constituting in some cases the only safety valve for free expression where association life in general was outlawed as in the aftermath of the 1967 law on associations (Yenshu Vubo 1998:134, Zambo Belinga 1997:116). These are what have been referred to elsewhere as home-based associations.

The regional drift in political life since the return to multiparty life in politics is also reflected in the nature of certain regional associations that have emerged in the modern period and whose claim is to foster the interests of the people at the regional level (Mbuagbo 2003, Menthong 1996, Miles 2001, Monga 2000, Sindjoun 1996, Tata Mentan 1996, Yenshu Vubo 1998b). While some of these associations are formal structures with a certain history and activism (SWELA), some are informal although their action is overtly public (NOWEDA/NOWEDEP, Bassa-Mpoo-Bati, chiefs associations, unions, or conferences, Ngondo), others are still plainly speaking, clandestine, although they are the object of public knowledge (Laakam, Essingang). All of these associations build on a traditional social base as they try to grapple with the reality of the coercive modern state structure. Advocates of the sanctity of the nation-state as it supersedes local realities and tends towards their obliteration in name of a nation-building process are quick to point to the disruptive and dislocating effects of what others inaptly call irredentist tendencies. Whatever the efforts, more than a century of Christian missionary activity, colonial repression and attempts at obliteration by the post-colonial state have not succeeded in putting out the flame of association life at either the local or the regional level. Indigenous peoples have not only maintained traditional association life, they have succeeded in inventing various forms of associations in response to the developments in the modern era.

Although the mobilisation of some of these movements took on a direction that tended to undermine the goals of collective life and the democratic ideal within the confines of the nation-state (witness the ethnic or ethno-regional drift in most African countries, and especially the Rwandan genocide), we argue here that it is still worthwhile examining the value of local forces in building viable social projects if we still have to live within the pluralistic world that the imperatives of the current nation-state system and the current globalisation process place on the diversity of peoples (see also Yenshu Vubo 2001, 2003). This will fall in line with Sachs's (1995) proposal that one viable strategy in meeting the development challenge is to forge new forms of partnerships among social agents that draw attention away from the 'present imbalance in favour of the central level', and 'to encourage initiatives from the bottom' (Sachs op cit.:34).

The argument in this paper is that these forms of association life are a pointer to forms of autonomy that are essential to development. By refusing to play the game of the state or to acquiesce in a dependency position vis-à-vis the latter, these associations offer a road to self-determination which is essential to development practice. This argument derives its thrust from Aragon's (1995) argument that development of exogenous origin is synonymous with dictatorship or authoritarianism. This conception puts autonomy and self-reliance at the centre of the development effort by arguing that development should grow from within, helping and aiding groups to find their ways within their own cultural patterns; in short, adding a cultural dimension to development.

The study combines ethnographic methods and a survey. Data for this paper are drawn from an ethnographic study of twenty-three traditional associations (rotating savings clubs, solidarity unions, status societies) in six ethnic groups (Moghamo, Bayang, Bafaw, Balong, Barombi, Bakundu) and a survey of twenty-nine home-based associations (cultural and development associations) representing three distinct ethno-linguistic and geo-cultural zones (Momo sub-group of Grassfields Bantu, Cross River Bantu and Coastal Bantu) in Cameroon and from the majority of provinces of the country (South West, Centre, Littoral, North West, South, East, Northern Provinces). We will start with an examination of the development implications of associations in traditional society and then move on to examine the role of home-based associations, which serve as the other end in the continuum.

Development Implications of Associational Life in Traditional Society

Outline for an Understanding

Association life occupies a dominant and even overbearing place in traditional society. In two of the cultural zones that we visited we could identify a large spectrum of associations of an economic, political, cultural and social nature. Although largely expressive of social solidarity that is so vibrant in a mainly traditional rural society, these associations functioned as the basis of survival in

the direction of sustainability. They helped generate a forward-looking vision for the society as well as the space for the exercise of democracy and autonomy which a largely truncated citizenship and the rituals of a warped neo-liberal vision of democracy cannot provide. They simply underscore the vitality of the social bonds that are constantly being entered into by local peoples outside the scope of the modern state and which provide the space for the elaboration of an alternative. In general, associations will vary according to the sector of main preoccupation (economy and finance, culture and tradition, the social or solidarity based), according to intensity of social bonds, and the degree of resilience of structure and duration. These associations may also vary according to whether they are more concerned with or derive from individual initiative or whether they result from the pressure of community interest or age-old custom. We will examine the associations under two broad categories depending on the domain of activity. One can affirm that although association life is generally built around solidarity, the rallying point will vary according to whether we are talking of the economy, culture, the exercise of authority, or the enforcement of social bonds. For purposes of this study we will refer to two main categories: the economy, on the one hand, and culture, social solidarity and tradition on the other.

Economy

Economic survival seems to be the motive around which most voluntary associations operate in the rural areas. At all the sites we visited we could notice farming groups, credit and thrift societies, small savings societies and solidarity savings unions. In fact, in the Moghamo area all associations have a financial side captured in the term 'ashow'. An understanding of these organisational forms is instructive with regard to the background of the so-called informal financial sector that has blossomed in both rural and urban areas in a period when it was expected that financial sector reforms would usher in a period of relatively better conditions in the financial sector (see Awung in this volume).

Rotating Savings Clubs

These clubs are universal all over Cameroon and constitute a key element in the local savings culture. Although a lot has already been written about these societies (Essombe-Edimu 1994), we come back here only to explore the principles in their functioning. Whether it is called 'ashow' with the Moghamo people, 'njangi' with the coastal Bantu-speaking people, the 'nchua/choh' of speakers of Mbam-Nkam and Ring group of Grassfields Bantu, or known by the French term 'tontine', the phenomenon constitutes the core of the savings culture of local peoples with roots buried far in the past (cf. Warnier 1994). Its basic principle of rotating contributions has of recent so pervaded association life in local communities that it constitutes the very soul of this form of social activity. In fact almost every association attempts to establish its own savings society where

members take turns in contributing and donating to members. An examination of the 'ashow' of the Moghamo and the 'njangi' of the coastal Bantu peoples will be instructive in this regard.

The 'ashow' begins with a small but reasonable number of people and then grows progressively as more people develop interest in it. Contributions range from insignificant sums – say a few hundred or thousand francs CFA – to more than ten thousand and even as much as twenty-five thousand, which is considerable by the standards of the rural areas. The question arises as to the security of the contribution. In the case of the 'ashow' domiciled in the residence of Elias Teke of Itoh, Batibo, each time a member receives a contribution he or she must present a surety who must not have received his or her contribution as yet. However, the principle here is that of trust and sincerity. Membership will range from less than ten to around fifty while resilience will depend on the age of some of these associations. Although some of them are of relatively recent creation some are more than forty years old. These savings clubs are not restricted to financial transactions as they stretch their activities into the social and cultural domains. Generally there is always entertainment during meetings and contributions to show solidarity with members in situations of either joy or sorrow. Another type of savings association among the Moghamo people is the 'ikeuh'.

The 'njangi' of the coastal peoples operates much on the same principle with regular contributions, which are donated to members in turn. The importance of these structures is that they assist in solving major problems within a family setting such as paying for children's education, building a house, buying farm implements and investing in small businesses.

Small Savings Societies or Solidarity Unions

In both cultural zones studied these kinds of associations go under the much pidginised terminology of 'meetings' (meaning 'association') or 'efferti'. The general principle is for a few people to come together and save regularly, and the savings are either shared at the end of the year or used for a common purpose. Unlike the 'ashow' or 'njangi', which involve considerable amounts of money, the 'meetings' attract relatively small savings.

Among the Barombi, Bafaw and Bakundu, groups that are known as 'meetings', abound. In Barombi Kang for example, there are a variety of meetings, some involving women, some the youth, some farmers. They promote savings and solidarity activities, for example, condoling with bereaved members. Some of these 'meetings' contribute exclusively in the preparation for the end of year festivities in the manner of what Masuko calls 'cooperatives for entertainment' (Masuko 1995:298). In this case members contribute a specific sum of money at regular intervals and the accumulated money is used at the end of the year to purchase consumable items towards the festivities at this period. A prominent type of such solidarity groups is the so-called 'kitchen njangi' or savings union or

club whose sole aim is to assist members to procure kitchen utensils. Membership is restricted to women with total enrolment ranging from thirty (as in Kake I) to more than a hundred. There are generally no restrictions on membership except for the fact that members should be viable enough to meet the required sums, which are generally low (for example, 2000 CFA in Kake II). In the case of the 'kitchen njangi' of Kake II there is also a regular savings aspect with no fixed rate. According to our informants there are about fifty such petty financial houses or associations in Kake II.

While the rotating savings clubs are the backbone of local investment in both economic and cultural (education) capital, thus forming the basis for a certain form of transformation, the existence and proliferation of small savings clubs and solidarity unions are indicative of a will to collective survival and proof of the vitality of a largely ignored aspect of civil society at its most rudimentary level. In this way they are both 'social consumption funds' and 'self-help insurance strategies' that have been described elsewhere for southern Africa (Masuko op cit.:279-308). Working largely outside the scope of the capitalist mode of pro- duction (with a low level of technology, the absence of an overbearing urban industrial or commercial bourgeoisie), this component of civil society provides a vent for the eventual conceptualisation of alternatives and thus constitutes the space for autonomous action unregulated by the state. Proof of this is the im- portation of this model into the urban setting where the rotating savings clubs and small savings clubs or solidarity unions constitute the backbone of the financial sector in Cameroon and elsewhere in Africa (Warnier 1994, Essombe-Edimu 1993, Wengue 2004, Niang 2000:136). In their functioning they provide the space for democratic practice that is absent in the neo-liberal model characterised by disenfranchisement, election rigging, exclusion and under-representation. It is also the space of rational, consensual and autonomous management of affairs where global management in the national public sphere has been largely wanting (given the mismanagement of public funds, embezzlement, and corruption). With its stress on the ethos of hard work, the virtues of honesty, sincerity and mutual respect, and the value of reciprocity and continuity, they are veritable schools of ethics indispensable for the development of a society. Niang (ibid.:134-135) has also observed this ethical and moral side and solidarity function of rotating savings clubs and solidarity unions in a Senegalese study.

Culture, Social Organisation and Mobilisation

The rest of the associations, which seemingly do not have a direct development role, can be lumped under the broad category of cultural associations and by extension considered associations with a direct bearing on social organisation, the structure of traditional authority, and mobilisation at both the local and regional level. It is this last aspect that is of capital importance to our discussion, since it connects to development and the search for alternatives. By lumping all else into

the category of the 'cultural', we are adopting both a Tylorian sense of culture, and the Marxist conception of the cultural at the level of superstructure (what Gramsci simply designates as structure). Here, culture is equated with identity or to that which defines the group. Within this category one finds local entertainment groups, fraternities or status societies, age-sets, solidarity groups, community-wide fraternities, and cultural and development associations. In some cases these structures transcend the immediate confines of the village in which an association is situated and take on a universal character at regional level. In the section on the legal framework of civil society and social movements, Temngah argues that the state excludes these forms from its definition of civil society. In practice the state is also dismissive of such associational life, which it assimilates to an anti-modern stance, not conforming to so-called natural law, and thus uncivil (see Fonchingong et al. in the present volume). Although virtually outside the scope of modernity, they nonetheless constitute their own domains of civility which merit exploration in their own right, as well as in relation to modernising trends such as democracy, citizenship, development and nation-building.

There have been a variety of calls for the traditional aspects of civil society to be integrated in the study of civil society as one would find it in the modern context (QUEST 1998:9, 12, 13, 15, Mbuagbo and Fru 2003, Breytenbach 1998:39-40). In fact, Breytenbach argues that these forms qualify to be styled 'proto-civil society' because 'the roots of civil society go far back into history, and is not alien to Africa. Once it confronted the colonial state; and now in post-authoritarian Africa, it is resurfacing as the communalisation of politics. The point is that ethnic associations 'should not be excluded simply because they are ethnic...' (Breytenbach ibid.:40). Others before us, such as Fodé Moussa Balla Sidibé, have indeed integrated traditional associations in the study of civil society. In his study of the brotherhood of hunters that covers a wide civilisation area for the Malinké and Bamanan of West Africa (Mali, Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, Guinea, Senegal, Niger, Gambia, Sierra Leone, Mauritania), Sidibé (1998:91-104) demonstrates that such organisations are the depositories of values which merit to be recognised in their own right and adapted to current realties of the continent. Our decision to include these forms into the study of civil society is for two essential reasons:

- They fall within the domain of associational life like every other form of association. Their adaptation to modern realities makes an important element in understanding the behaviour of non-state actors in the articulation of collective interests.
- They form the background against which we can understand the articulation of certain collective interests as they tend to redefine their role as social change is underway.

Their eruption into modern life transforms them from a mere 'proto-civil society' or the manifestation of communalistic politics (Breytenbach op cit.) or

communalistic life (Wiredu 1998) into a vital component of civil society in its own right.

Significance of Traditional Association Life for Development

The characteristic of these associations that is of importance to us is the mobilisation for survival and sustenance, for social, cultural and economic production and reproduction, and growth, however limited that may be. One would be forced to ponder whether this is just a reproduction of poverty or simply stagnation. In other words, is there vitality or are we just dealing with the reproduction of low levels of survival? This is the crux of the matter. One is rather optimistic in observing that in a world largely characterised by ambient poverty, these associations offer a fall-back position. In the case of savings clubs and the savings component of associations they provide a much-needed culture of saving, investment and capital that is lacking in a new culture of consumerism largely bereft of a culture of production. The funds generated also provide the much needed capital for petty household production (farm input, investment in education). One can go further to say that these strategies cannot be considered simply coping mechanisms because the existence of savings implies a surplus or the will to generate surplus.

The proliferation of such associations is proof of the vitality of a certain rudimentary civil society that seems largely overlooked. It would be instructive to interpret them as strategies of existence, continuity and livelihood in their own right, in the way Habermas considers civil society as a way of life (cf. Vilas 1998:71). It is the arena for generating an alternative vision of society both rooted in the past and anchored in the modern world, the space for the exercise of democratic values by way of a self regulating ethic and an autonomy, which a truncated citizenship within the modern state is incapable of providing. It is this autonomy and cultural sustainability that Aragon is referring to when he states that development or development models imposed from outside are synonymous with dictatorship. One should not ask whether they can serve as a model because they are already the model in both the modern urban setting and are the only hope for the common man in the rural areas (cf. Warnier 1994). In fact, they offer greater levels of sustainability and have a far greater impact than institutions deriving from the post-1990 economic and social reforms. Umbrella associations taking the appellation of 'cultural and development associations', which we are going to examine in detail in the next session, are the arena and strategy for reviving the fortunes of communities on the edge of decline owing to a largely alienating modernity which Africans in general have to negotiate.

Coming back to the mode of existence of these associations, which simply escapes the control of the modern state structures, we ask whether they can even be controlled or whether the state could control everything. It is in this regard that we consider them as lying at the very soul of the local society, generating as it

were an ancient mystique of vitality and continuity. This falls in line with Julio de Santa Ana's (1998:65) affirmation that 'la société civile est véritablement la conscience d'une nation' (civil society is truly the conscience of a nation). One can then postulate that they are situated at a deeper, more essential substratum than the modern structures of the so-called new civil society that are situated at a more superficial and superstructural level. We can also affirm that this explains the success of the one and the inability of the other to take root (see Enoh Tanjong's study in this volume).

This brings into focus the definition of civil society as a *process*, that is, an emerging and thus real society anchored in history and entrenched in local practices. This process can be opposed to modernity as exemplified in the state ideology of nation-building that is hardly taking root but operates as a superimposed society – or in the words of Goran Hyden 'suspended above society' (in Mamdani op cit.:606), or 'a balloon in the sky' (Osaghae 1998:277) in the wake of the failure of the post-colonial state. One definition considers existing civil society as constitutive of structure in the Gramscian sense (in Santa Ana op cit.). Any other structures posing as civil society which do not take root can only be treated as an intention towards civil society or a dream of civil society that must not be confused with actual existing civil society.

Principal Characteristics of Home-Based Associations or Cultural and Development Associations

In examining the principal characteristics of these associations we will be looking at their objectives, the nature of the association (whether these are local, or regional or sectional), the demographic composition (age, gender), structure and composition (membership, organisation), relations with other organisations and mode of functioning (decision making processes, execution of projects, fund raising, management of projects, selection of leadership structure).

Objectives

Three themes dominate the objectives reported by our respondents: the promotion of solidarity among members, the contribution to the development of communities of origin, and the promotion of cultural heritage. The theme of solidarity pervades the objectives of all associations but becomes heightened when this objective is associated with the promotion of cultural identity. Besides promoting elements of material and non-material culture such as language, religion, dress, food, and authority structure, some of the associations go beyond the solidarity element to the enhancement of a sense of belonging that assimilates the ethnic group to a family.[2] In fact, although some associations' membership is derived from a wide community base, they take the designation of 'Family Meeting' (Famille Musgum de Yaoundé, Famille Lombi du Nkam, Njarenka Family Meeting) while others simply manifest a spirit of family. While the MBOG

LIA ADNA MATEN has the declared objective of bringing together all the Bassa, Mpoo and Bati (treated as families) into a single structure towards common development ('rassembler les familles Bassa, Mpoo et Bati en vue d'un développement commun'), the Association Culturelle et Traditionnelle Elog Mpoo (ACTEM), which is specific to the Mpoo group, wishes to distinguish itself from the former by claiming that it is not an association but 'une association familiale' whose prime objective is 'l'enracinement identitaire et la revalorisation et promotion culturelles'. Such global objectives go to the extent of making claims for the carving of administrative units to correspond to the limits of geo-cultural zones. This is the case of MBOG LIA ADNA MATEN, which is calling for the creation of a Greater Sanaga Province comprising the present Sanaga, Maritime, Nyong and Kelle, and Ocean Divisions that correspond to the Bassa-Mpoo-Bati homeland.

Although some associations mentioned only one of the above three as their objectives, the majority of associations had more than one aim. In fact, the associations with a single objective were in the minority. Only four associations, namely CREDEM, ASSEEC, AJDS, and BANBA – MAMBANDA, mentioned development as their sole objective, while only one association, FAMY, mentioned solidarity as its sole objective. The rest of the associations combined at least two of these objectives with the majority combining all three objectives.

Scope of Associations

Eighteen of the twenty-nine associations we studied were of a regional character. In other words, these are associations whose activities transcend the limits of an ethnic group to encompass peoples with origins from the same cultural zone or administrative district. The rest are community-based organisations limited to particular villages or communities of origin. Although some associations with a regional base are gender neutral, implying that they are open to both men and women, some are clearly women's associations (Lumière du Nkam, AFMAD, and Golden Ladies). Our sample is also representative of youth groups (the students' associations, youth development organisations) whether this is at the level of region or community of origin. At the level of the latter we did not target women's groups given the extensive attention paid to them at the level of traditional association life.

In terms of regional representation we have tried to touch on all cultural zones and geo-administrative areas (North West Province, Bamileke area, Sawa cultural zone, Grand North, the Beti region), although the coastal region (South West and Littoral) has had more attention than all other regions. The coastal region is the principal focus of our study because of the attention it has received as a result of the autonomist claims that ensued from the post-1996 elections period. We are then using the other areas for largely comparative purposes to measure the viability of these tendencies towards autonomy and their utility in a context of decentralisation and regional reorientation of political and administra-

tive life. Our typology contrasts considerably with the four-level typology advanced by Niang (op cit.:112) that breaks down associations in Dakar into associations with a uni-local, pluri-local, regional and supra-regional or national basis. Only our regional associations correspond to Niang's associations with a regional base.

Structure and Organisation

In terms of structure and composition, all associations have formalised hierarchical structures. Typically, an association's constitution makes provision for an executive committee and a general assembly which brings together all members. Apart from an executive committee some of these associations have an advisory council or council of elders. Invariably, the association will have branches nationwide or even in foreign countries, depending on the residence of persons of that community of origin in a locality. This trend is also observed by Zambo Belinga (op cit.:116) among elite associations in general. The adoption of modern modes of organisation with a formalised structure in the style described by Everett Rogers (1960) has also been observed in other contexts such as Dakar (Niang op cit.:104) or the largely traditional rural societies of Cameroon. One can affirm that organisation according to formal modern criteria is thus becoming an almost universal feature of association life in the African context. The general criterion for eligibility for membership is belonging to the community of origin, although there is an allowance for honorary membership.

Age of Associations

Concerning longevity one can classify the associations into three categories: the relatively old associations whose birth is situated in the colonial era (MECA) or in the colonial period but deriving from the very deep distant past – Braudel's *longue durée*[3] – for example, ACTEM, MBOG LIA, Assemblée Communautaire et Traditionnelle de Souza; associations deriving from the pre-1990 post-colonial period (14); and relatively young associations created in the post-1990 period (13). ACTEM and MBOG LIA are associations with origins in a very distant past. Ebune reports that there was a proliferation of home-based associations in colonial British Southern Cameroons generally, going under the appellation of improvement unions (Ebune 2004:62-69).

The year 1990 is taken as an important threshold in the development of associations because of the 1990 law on associations. This is judged against the period following the 1967 law that practically outlawed associational life in Cameroon (Yenshu Vubo 1997). For this period, eleven out of the fourteen associations were targeted. Although selectively targeted, these associations were chosen anonymously (not to say randomly), that is, without prior knowledge of the date of formation. However, it was not the 1990 law on associations or the current phase of liberalisation that facilitated the growth of certain types of associations. The repressive nature of the 1967 law outlawing association life was equally

responsible for paradoxically promoting the proliferation of associations with an ethnic base (Yenshu Vubo 1997, Zambo Belinga 1997). The very depth of associations points to the fact that they are not a novel phenomenon but that they owe their existence to a colonial past, which was largely disruptive, and recent modernisation resulting in 'mounting poverty, failing infrastructure and services, and more generally, weak or abdicating governments' (Tostensen, Tvedten and Vaa 2001:5). It is also indicative of the fact that they are linked in historical terms to the 'improvement unions' of the colonial period (see Ebune op cit.).

Inter-Associational Relations

These associations entertain a variety of links with other organisations and structures at local, regional, national (inter-regional) and international levels. At local level, associations of the cultural and development association type are linked to the structures of traditional authority as well as many facets of traditional life in the communities (dance groups, age groups, and local voluntary associations). Some of the associations we studied were either branches of a bigger structure or were emanations of larger movements, for example, Sawa students, Youth of the North, Students of the East. For instance, CEBA is affiliated to the Jeunesse Mpoo, itself an appendage of ACTEM. It also has links with the MBOG LIA that brings together the Bassa-Mpoo-Bati as related peoples sharing a common supra-regional cultural identity.

In the case of the community-based associations and the regional associations or movements, one can say that they are both connected to traditional authority structures, by virtue of the cultural component of their designation, and act as umbrella structures to other bodies situated at a lower level. These associations are also linked to more global structures operating at regional level. ACTEM, which is specific to the Mpoo, has links with MBOG LIA (Bassa-Mpoo-Bati) and Ngondo of the Sawa (coastal peoples of the Ocean, Sanaga Maritime, Nkam, Wouri, Moungo, Nyong and Kelle divisions), structures that are premised on a regional supra-cultural identity.[4] Likewise, BACDU is part of the much wider Oroko Tribal Association, CREDEM part of the Comité de Développement du Groupement Nguen (CODEGRON), that covers the administrative district in which Mgbaga is situated, while FAMY is part of the Associations des Massa, the Musgum being a sub-group of the Massa. One also finds relations operating at a horizontal level in a cross-cultural direction: Sawa students of the CESD having relations with KATE (Sawa), Kul Beti (Beti), students of the Greater North and associations of Bassa-Mpoo-Bati students; NOWEDEP (North West Province) co-operating with SWELA (South West Province); and MBOG LIA linking with Magissa of the East Province. We also find attempts to federate association structures as in the case of the Mutuelle des Associations Culturelles du Cameroun, and the Réseaux National des Habitants du Cameroun. In this way we can say that these associations operate at various levels each linked to the

other. It is in this way that the modern is linked to the traditional, the younger generation to the older, rural reality to urban reality. Other links are entertained with state structures and the so-called non-governmental organisations (NGOs) but such links are dictated by the search for external financing. While the links within the local and regional sphere (which the majority are anyway) are established within a spirit of independence and autonomy, links established in the quest for funding are often tainted by a dependency attitude. It is also important to highlight the tendency of certain associations to transcend the parochialism of association life by creating trans-ethnic links and thus fostering cross-cultural relations where others will see only conflict and contradiction. One has to explore the value of this trend in the nation-building project.

Besides the four persons who did not indicate whether they belonged to any association other than the one they were representing, the rest indicated that they belonged to other associations or association structures of a similar nature whether they were home-based organisations, professional organisations, religious organisations, social clubs or federative structures. As such, one can find lawyers in the Bar Association, engineers in the Society of Engineers and teachers in the Teachers Associations. Leaders of community-based associations within specific communities could also be observed to belong to associational structures within the same community or associations of a regional or federative nature. The members of the student associations were also members of associations of a more global and general nature operating within the same region. The president of CEBA is also Secretary General of the University of Douala student branch of MBOG LIA and Secretary General of the Wouri Regional antenna of the Jeunesse Elog-Mpoo (JEM), i.e., the Elog Mpoo Youth Association. The President of AEDELE is also a member of the Amicale des Ressortissants de la Lekié à L'INJS (AMILIS) (Fraternity of Lekié Elements in the Higher School of Youth and Sports). The National President of the AJDS is also a member of the Associations des Ressortissants Nordistes á Yaoundé and the Association des Ressortissants de Petté Résident à Yaoundé, while the Secretary General of the Famille Musgum de Yaoundé is also Secretary General of the Cercle des Etudiants Musgum de Yaoundé (Musgum Student Club in Yaoundé).

Some respondents are involved in more than one home-based association either within the same community or in a regional or federative structure. One can also find respondents in church-based groups (choirs, men and women's fellowships) and social clubs (Alma Mater or Alumni associations, philanthropic societies, and entertainment clubs). A curious case are those belonging to political parties referred to by the CESD respondent, or to structures with strong political connotations (President Biya's Youths, PRESBY) made by the respondent for MBOG LIA ADNA MATEN. Such mentions are indicative of the confusion that can be observed in some circles concerning the difference between political parties and civil society organisations.

In general, it can be observed that respondents were involved and played multiple roles in a variety of associations operating at different hierarchical levels and in varied domains (social, political, cultural, and religious). This shows the very interconnectedness of association life with the elites acting as necessary connection points or the nexus between different levels and domains. Elites are also active in the transmission of skills across a variety of domains in an almost imperceptible manner. In this regard, knowledge obtained in running a professional society is also deployed in home-based associations. One can say that the very interconnectedness of association life as we will see later is at the heart of building the social fabric and the conviviality that holds promise for Cameroon in a context where the slogans for national unity and integration have yielded little fruit or resulted in just a contrary of the desired results. This also puts the elite leadership at the junctions and connection points between traditional life from which the home-based association are derived, and modern life in which they have been deeply immersed by reason of training, professional involvement and life-style. It is thus instrumental in the management and negotiation of the transition between the largely traditional life of the rural areas and the modernity to which the local peoples are constantly subjected.

The various levels of participation at both local and regional level tend in the direction of our concept of levels of historical awareness and the management of multiple identities (Yenshu Vubo 2003:618). We thus find people participating in associations specific to their communities and also active in pan-regional structures. I have indicated that in the post-1996 period following the Sawa Protests (Yenshu Vubo 1998b, 2003, 2005) some people claiming a pan-Sawa identity retreated to their micro-identity formations to 'provoke a certain cultural revivalism' (Yenshu Vubo 2003:611) that we find in the Elog Mpoo (Bakoko) and Bankon (Abo) associations (ACTEM, MBOG LIA, Assemblée Communautaire et Traditionnelle de Souza), which strive to protect their specific identities. That they are still active in the pan-Sawa movement through structures such as the Ngondo is expressive of participation in two levels of 'historical awareness and action: the level of primordial historic community and… regional trans-ethnic movements' (ibid.). This goes to underline the level of trans-ethnic universality that carries with it 'values of tolerance, accommodation and cooperation that characterise regional level groups [in opposition] to competition, conflicts and animosity' (ibid.:620). In this regard, association life thus presents itself as the school for a trans-ethnic universality via its capacity to provide a framework for conviviality.

Governance Issues: Decision-making, Leadership Choice, Management

Decision-making in these associations is situated at the level of general assemblies and is either by consensus or by open ballot on a universal suffrage basis. Proposals for decisions on important issues arrived at in executive committee meetings are tabled before the assemblies for debate and adoption. It is rather rare to find

executive committees taking decisions that are binding on all members. As with the associations emanating from traditional cultural life we can say that, in this way, the associations provide a space for democratic practice and the exercise of autonomy that is lacking within the national space with liberal-democratic pretensions. One has to note that warped legislation and the propensity of the regime to subvert democratic change by conducting a ritual of elections tilted in its favour are at the very basis of the widely reported voter apathy in Cameroon.

The contribution of association life to autonomy and democratic practice is also reflected in the process of the choice of leadership. In general, associations spell out the qualities required of persons who are going to hold positions of responsibility within their ranks. Besides moral qualities, financial viability, social standing, degree of active participation in association life and degree of schooling in home values, knowledge of home language and cultural practices are also generally required. In this regard and to this extent, association life provides an alternative space where people can take autonomous decisions and provide leadership for themselves in a spirit of fairness and tolerance. As we have indicated before, its ideal is to provide a school of ethics to its members, which is largely lacking in the present dispensation. In this regard, the associations correspond to the type of organisation with a non-regulatory and decentralised power structure which promotes participation, solidarity, unity and members' interests found in Niang's typology (Niang op cit.:119).

This spirit of autonomy can also be observed in the execution and management of projects as well as fund raising. Respondents in seven of the associations we interviewed indicated that projects are executed by members in eight associations projects were reported to be executed by an ad hoc committee set up for the purpose. Ten associations reported that they create specific project committees while four associations indicated that their projects were executed under the supervision of the executive committee in the name of the community. Funds are derived principally from the following sources: financial contributions of members; registration fees; income from levies, fines and interest on loans; special fund raising campaigns and donations from elite figures. Such funds are estimated by most respondents at about 80 per cent of the income of the association while the rest is obtained from the state and donor agencies (NGOs, diplomatic missions of foreign countries).

In terms of time management, members (whether ordinary or executive) adjust timetables to suit their professional and family life. However, the watchword was that of sacrifice of time and effort on behalf of community interests, most of the activities requiring a spirit of abnegation. Moreover, the schedule of activities of the association is always organised in a way to accommodate the diverse preoccupations of members, and especially the executive.

One can only evaluate the importance of these characteristics when we evaluate conceptions of development and development practices.

Development Thinking and Practice

Definitions of Development

The majority of respondents advanced definitions of development that alluded to progress or change in terms of process, and social betterment when it concerned content. The idea of progress was captured in terms such as: betterment, improvement, change, advancement, better results, quality of life and struggle, all of them taken in a positive spirit. This is captured by NKONI Cameroon as 'change, movement from one stage of life (society) into another for a positive outcome, improvement in the standards of living'.

In terms of content, although the economic dimension (poverty reduction, improved income/finances, self sufficiency) was taken as basic, other dimensions relating to the environment, social services (education, health, roads, recreation services, electrification, provision of potable water), nutrition, culture (change of mentality, communication, access to improved technologies and social knowledge, improvement in literacy and educational levels, democratisation) were also cited as aspects of development, thus underlining the multidimensional nature of the concept. The respondent for CREDEM interpreted development as a plural matter, since it was 'polysémique' (polysemous) and taken as a 'croissance des biens matériels et l'éducation progressive [vers un changement] des mentalités á partir de l'enseignement des valeurs axiologiques' (growth in material goods and progressive education towards a change in mentalities through an inculcation of values). This was also the view of the respondents of the Famille Musgum de Yaoundé (FAMY), ASEEC, AEDELE, and RAJEB. One can understand these multidimensional conceptualisations of development given the generally high level of education of the respondents. The conclusion to be drawn from this trend is that, compared to ordinary local people whose conceptions of development are limited to social side issues (Yenshu Vubo 1991, Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong 2002), the largely educated leadership of these associations is very knowledgeable about the most current comprehensive definitions of development (Sachs 1995:22-26).

In terms of actors or beneficiaries, respondents referred to individuals, groups, kin groups, and communities (Famille Lombi du Nkam, Assemblée Communautaire et Traditionnelle de Souza, Njarenka Family Meeting, Nkang Cultural and Development Association) and the global society, stressing in this regard the need to conceive development as involving the individual and the collective as two indispensable and complementary poles. The respondents for BANBA-MAMBANDA and Lumière du Nkam added an inter-generational dimension when they referred to children and the education of the youth (Sachs 1995, Aragon 1995). The necessary interconnectedness between social categories, whether conceived as elites and masses, as indigenes and settlers, or developed and underdeveloped growth poles within the same country, was emphasised by ACTEM and NKONI Cameroon.

Development Priorities of Associations

The prioritisation of development needs took much the same form as the definitions of development: improvement in individual and collective welfare, with the economic as basic but laying stress on improvements in social infrastructure and education. Although the majority of respondents mentioned the provision of roads, health infrastructure (hospitals, health centres), better water supply, electricity, school buildings and the construction of community halls, there was a tendency by others to conceptualise development more as a process of change than the provision of material goods. As such, one could find respondents referring to improvements in health conditions and standards (NOWEDEP) or health education and disease prevention strategies such as HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns (CESD, CEBA, and Golden Ladies). In the same way, there was a stress on education as a global change of mentality, the promotion of schooling (orientation, financial support to students and pupils), promotion of cultural learning ('l'enseignement de la langue et de la généalogie... réhabilitation de l'initiation à la tradition des jeunes Mpoo' - respondent for ACTEM), and the modernisation of farming and livestock breeding methods as opposed to the mere provision of infrastructure. Although there was mention of assistance to farmers in terms of subsidies and the provision of market places, specific mention was also made of the need for a 'good economic and business atmosphere', for food self sufficiency, collective farming, the creation of associations of an economic and financial nature, investment in financially profitable ventures, and several other specific economic activities that could improve the economic situation of individuals. One also finds that while some respondents mention the creation of community halls and recreation centres ('foyers culturels'), there is a parallel stress on reviving and promoting their cultural heritage.

There is also a shift in some responses from the content orientation of the priorities to the spirit and form of development action. The respondent for CREDEM thus spoke of promoting the spirit of collegiality through common initiative groups (CIGs), while a member of NDCO talked of getting people active in 'cooperative or community action groups'. The aforementioned implies that development is seen as not only the improvement in facilities but also the institution of practices and forms of organisation, which alone can ensure that the process is lasting. At the conceptual level therefore the associations' definitions integrate the much-proclaimed aspect of sustainability that came to be at the centre of development thought in the 1990s, albeit in a novel sense. The latter consists in seeing development as a process and a form of action and not only a provision of services and facilities, these processes and organisational forms taking root in people, transforming them, and sustaining the basis of motivations. These definitions of priorities are much in line with proposals for enhancing development activities in the communities as we will see later.

These definitions of priorities contrast considerably with those of the central government that defines development as the provision of infrastructure for social amenities (school buildings, health centres, roads etc.), all in a spirit of paternalism and electoral trade-offs. Such official approaches often end up as the provision of infrastructure with inadequate equipment and staffing. As we have shown before (Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong 2002:32) the current state of affairs characterised by the pressure from international agencies for the state to limit spending on social services does not permit the erstwhile paternalistic and patrimonial state to live up to its promises regarding the provision of utilities. Faced with this situation, the state often resorts to selective provisioning with an undertone of partisan political discrimination which is at the basis of a 'politics of reciprocity'[5] or electoral trade-offs. The definitions offered by association leaders thus consider the transformation of social structures as the real centre of the process rather than the mere provision of amenities. In this way, people inevitably become not only the beneficiaries but also conscious actors, as they and their social structures are transformed. This also contrasts with the welfare and social infrastructure approach of rural peoples, themselves derived from dominant statist visions of the development decades (Yenshu Vubo 1991, Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong 2002:14), and points to an evolution in world view as we are dealing here with a much more educated, and therefore, enlightened, leadership.

The Role of Other Actors in Development

The foregoing explains why the roles of associations in development are identified as being not only the identification of projects and the mobilisation of funds, but also education, taken as both the raising of popular awareness and the improvement in social and cultural learning. In this regard, respondents were in the main concerned with the human component of organisation, mobilisation and cultural change.

In the main, most respondents pointed to local peoples and communities as those best placed to undertake development projects. However, some respondents were specific about the quality of people to execute the projects. While the Famille Lombi du Nkam (Yabassi) pointed to experts such as engineers and technicians, the AJDS and LECUDO mentioned businessmen, although under the supervision of the community or associations as commissioning bodies. Only the AJDS and FAMY mentioned the government and the leadership class. This confirms our previous studies, which point to a multiplicity of actors, and not just the 'community', as indispensable actors in the development process (Yenshu Vubo 1991, Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong op cit.:15).

Respondents who thought that the community or local people were best placed to undertake development action indicated that funds could easily be mobilised at that level (NOWEDEP), that people are conscious of their needs

and priorities, and that in the process of execution they are likely to show dedication and the desire for the best. RAJEB'S respondent argued that since the local peoples are beneficiaries there is a greater likelihood that these projects will be protected and put to valuable use by them. The respondents who argued for businessmen, the state and NGOs, advanced financial viability as an asset that was lacking with the communities and associations, although that was not a majority opinion.

These opinions can only be evaluated in relation to the achievements of the associations under study.

Achievements and Gains

One can evaluate the achievements of the associations according to two main criteria: financial value and the nature of projects. We will start our analysis with an evaluation of the financial value of the projects before examining the nature of the projects.

Financial Value of Projects

Table 1 presents a comparative analysis of the financial value of projects according to type of association. The techniques used here are principally descriptive statistics (totals, range, mean, median).

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of Financial Value of Projects (in CFA)

	Type of Association	Number	Value of Projects	Range	Mean	Median
1	Students Unions	3	2324716	781666	774905.3	5,23,333
2	Youth Associations	7	6167546	37,20,000	881078	19,10,000
3	Women's Associations	3	31,650,000	15,450,000	10,550,000	12,275,000
4	Community Development Associations (CDA)	10	2383537000	80,358,000	23853700	40,821,000
5	Regional Development Associations (RDA)	9	185705000	32,500,000	20633888.9	17,750,000
	TOTAL	32	464384262	80, 980, 000	14512008.2	40, 600, 000

What the mean figures tell us is that community development associations (the so-called cultural and development associations or CDAs), and the regional development associations are the most viable structures in terms of financial investment. It is significant to note that the mean for CDAs is greater than that of

the RDAs, although the latter cover a greater surface area than the CDAs. This shows that the more localised groups tend to have a greater mobilising capacity than the regional structures that are for the most part either of relatively recent origin, or are only loose structures involving for the most part urban-based elite. The three women's groups have an impressive record with a mean of 10,550,000 CFA, pointing to the increasingly positive role women are playing in development. This point becomes all the more evident when one notices that they are also active at the level of the CDAs and RDAs. Low figures for the students and youth associations are understandable given that these categories of people are characterised by low incomes and a low mobilising capacity.

Figures for ranges and medians point to the wide disparities in the mobilising capacity and financial viability across associations. For instance, one finds one youth group that has only been able to put together 20,000 CFA, while another at the other pole has managed to collect 3,800,000 CFA. Similarly, a women's group at one end collected 4,550,000 CFA, only 22.75 per cent of the capacity of women's groups with the highest financial investment so far (20,00,000) at the other extreme. In the same way, the CDA with the lowest achievement in financial terms could only raise 642,000 CFA as against 81,000,000 CFA for the most successful CDA. Although the difference between the lowest figures and highest sums are quite large, CDAs are not so dramatically wide apart. All in all this points to significant differences in mobilising capacity in the associations, which will determine their achievement levels. These disparities can be explained by the viability of the membership and mobilising capacity of the associations. In that regard, the viability of associations can be said to depend largely on the nature of projects.

The projects are diverse in nature but we can classify them under five different categories: projects of social infrastructure and utilities, institutional development, economic investments or support to economic activities, culture, and a show of solidarity and assistance to the underprivileged. However, projects of social infrastructure provisioning, institutional development and culture (taken as identity affirmation) are predominant. Within the projects classified as social infrastructure and utilities one would place the construction of schools, health centres, roads, bridges and community halls, the rehabilitation of structures (schools, community halls), the provision of water supply and electricity, and assistance in equipping schools (desks, laboratory equipment) and hospitals.

We decided to consider projects as institutional development when they relate to reorientation in organisation or structure. Under this category of projects one would also find the elaboration of existing structures of associations, cooperation with other associations, creation of collective and corporate structures (credit unions, cooperatives), creation of community radio, elaboration of plans and documentation, and contributions to national institutions and structures (grandstand, inter-ministerial block). This adds a much forgotten dimension to the development question: institution building and reorientation of structures.

Developments related to culture, which celebrate identity and the group, tend to stress education and mobilisation as important components of development. This can be seen in the volume of spending on projects of such a nature. In this category one can place the motivation of pupils and students (prizes, internships, scholarships); the organisation of cultural festivities,[6] popular or functional education (health education, training of farmers, seminars); participation in national activities, study visits, exhibitions, provision of didactic materials, information technology (radio station, web site); promotion of discussion forums and enthronements of chiefs. These associations thus carry development beyond the rather simplistic vision which confines it to infrastructure provisioning (see Yenshu Vubo 1991, Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong op cit.), or improvements in the economy alone. Such projects go to underline the cultural dimension of the associations as an indispensable component of their raison d'être.

With regard to the economy, development efforts are somewhat limited, for example the donation of farming equipment and inputs, the organisation of community farms, and diverse investments as in the cases of AFMAD and ADELE. The relative lack of concern with improvements in the economy has also been observed in previous studies (Yenshu Vubo 1991, Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong 2002:22). Shows of solidarity are manifested in assistance to the sick, assistance to disadvantaged pupils and students, assistance in funerals and the provision of a training centre for underprivileged children. By and large the view of development projected here as we observed elsewhere is almost exclusively one of social development even when the cultural element is added. As we have indicated before such a view misses out as both the economy and environment are absent (see Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong 2002, ibid.).

Benefits and Evaluation of Activities

Benefits identified by respondents were primarily of a social nature: social prestige and moral satisfaction (NOWEDEP), pride of belonging to the group, solidarity and mutual self help and social support, social recognition, a sense of public service ('homme public', 'fierté de sacrifice') and social learning. In fact, many respondents indicated that they did not derive any personal benefits from belonging to an association but that the over-riding gains were the spirit of solidarity and the social learning that they acquired as members and as leaders. While the respondents for CESD referred to knowledge of social relations, the AEDELE informant broke up this learning into horizontal or fraternal learning within members, on the one hand, and vertical learning between the younger and the older generations or elites as well as apprenticeship in managerial skills, on the other. This is understandable given that student organisations are composed of young people who are essentially at the learning stage in their lives. The CREDEM respondent was more elaborate when he stated that 'there are no material gains'.

As we have indicated elsewhere, the associations are in this regard schools of ethics that foster the values of sacrifice, abnegation and service to the community

so much lacking in the social fabric of the country. The association thus constitutes an important entry point in moral education, which should not be overlooked. It is situated at the very core of the moral fibre of the society itself. What also seemed to matter were the respondents' sense of self-fulfilment in seeing that projects were realised rather than the material benefits that could be derived from the associations' activities. This is precisely the type of ideal action Niang prescribes for the ideal association as being the source of real satisfaction for the group and members of an association ('source de satisfaction pour le groupe et ou les membres de l'association', Niang op cit.:157).

The sense of abnegation, sacrifice and contribution to public service is expressed in members' sense of satisfaction when they succeed in achieving objectives. Only five associations judged the balance sheet of their activities as not being satisfactory. The general tendency was to consider the association's activities as on a good footing despite obstacles and setbacks. In quantitative terms, some organisations rated their success at 50 per cent (MECA, Kumba chapter), 60 per cent (Nkang Development and Cultural Organisation) and between 50 and 60 per cent (Nchang Development and Cultural Organisation, NDCO). However, the impression respondents gave was that development activities were an on-going process which could not simply be evaluated in quantitative and situational terms, that is, at any fixed point in time. What has to be taken note of here is the sense of modesty in evaluating one's own achievement. Although this points to the evident limits of association life – as we remark with financing and expertise – which are the root cause, it is encouraging to discover that people understand that not all is well. It is thus a warning to proponents of the utopian view or of a moralising vision (civil society as the carrier of limitless potential) who are quick to project all sorts of optimism onto associations or civil society. It is encouraging to know that despite setbacks, optimism and belief in the life of associations remains a constant feature of associations.

The Association as an Imperfect but Perfectible Human Project: Problems and the Search for Solutions

Problems

Executive members of associations must accept that some sacrifice (of their time and resources) is required if they are to act effectively. They may face logistical and transport problems. More generally, associational leaders may face destructive criticism that might lead to conflict and cleavages. Tensions may arise from divisions and differences among the executive committees, between the executive members and ordinary members, and between ordinary members. Member participation may be a source of worry as problems of absenteeism, indiscipline, and political interference cause leadership headaches and even associational cleavages

of a partisan nature. All these can make the work of coordination tedious and place a serious burden on leaders.

The problems faced by executive committee members are identical with the problems faced by the association as a whole. Some associations underscored the increasing politicisation of associations, especially interference from the dominant political parties, creating serious divisions within the elite to the point of generating deep antipathies. Associating with one set of elites is synonymous with creating enmity with others. A respondent reported that politicians tend to confuse the activities of associations with political activities. People tend to subordinate associations to certain political elites. For Chief Pierre Celestin Pengno of Mbengue, speaking on behalf of ACTEM and the Association of Bakoko (Elog Mpoo) Chiefs, the most crucial problem is that of managing political problems such as the clamour for a province for the Sanaga-Maritime region, which risks eclipsing other problems advanced by Elog Mpoo associations. The risk of political factions manipulating civil society associations reported by other researchers is real in this case. The observation here also shows the difficult situation in which associations find themselves vis-à-vis political parties. Certain associations have at their helm high state officials, representing in a way their regions of origin (Zambo Belinga 1997:116).

However, the ability of the association's leadership to identify this state of affairs as a problem points to a search for autonomy by the associations that should not be overlooked. Associations must be on their guard against the tendency for politicians to interfere in association life and to attempt to exploit the associations' achievements for political ends. It has been argued elsewhere that, contrary to generalisations about the partisan motivations of certain regional autonomy movements, for example, the Sawa movement of the 1990s (Konings and Nyamnjoh 2000, 2003), politicians and especially those of the dominant hegemonic, ruling party have tended to make use of some of these movements when they least expect it (Yenshu Vubo 2005). Although Niang (op cit.:133) argues that the rejection of subordination to political interests reduces the chances of institutional support, the tendency in Cameroon is for such structures to be used in inter-ethnic rivalry for positions in government or the administration. When this occurs, sane and healthy competition between associations, as they strive to develop their respective communities of origin, is replaced with inter-ethnic conflict engineered by politicians competing for advantaged positions.

Financial difficulties are reported by the majority of associations as being both a problem for associations as such, and an issue when it comes to executing projects. However laudable an association's aims may be, for it to be efficient and efficacious, it needs to have adequate finance. Given that funds have to be raised almost exclusively from membership dues, the task may prove difficult in an economic context where the incomes of the majority of local people are low. The generally weak financial situation of associations exposes them to interference

from political elites whose donations may only come at the cost of manipulation for partisan ends. Both this political hazard and the resort to international NGOs and other donors, for the most part of Northern origin, seriously corrode the autonomy of associations when agendas have to be modified to suit the funding agencies. The conclusion to be drawn from the foregoing is that the viability of association life depends in part on the general economic conjuncture, although association life may also contribute to the vitality of the economy (see Awung's study in this volume).

The following social constraints are identified as undermining the functioning of associations and their role in project execution: leadership tussles, absenteeism and irregularity in participation in association life, divisions and cleavages, a low sense of sacrifice, the lack of expertise in project execution and management, mismanagement, embezzlement of funds and corruption, and a lack of interest and participation from target communities. These are problems that can be identified in the Cameroonian society in general and which point to the fact that association life is a reflection of the society in which it is situated. In other words, solutions to such problems within associations will also contribute to their solution within the society at large, especially as we have argued that associations constitute schools of ethics. Conversely, the solutions at global level will also be reflected in the life of associations.

Problems in themselves are a pointer to the fact that we are far from the utopian vision that some organisations, especially donor agencies and pro-democracy movements, are wont to project of association life or civil society (Houtart 1998:14, cf. also Tostensen, Tvedten and Vaa's typology 2001:7-26). It also underlines the fact that association life is far from perfect and is only, indeed, a perfectible project. That means that despite the multiple difficulties plaguing associations, there is a commitment to continue in the same spirit. This is sustained by the fact that the evaluation of benefits and activities so far is globally positive. Niang (op cit.:127-130) prescribes a typology of associations according to their capacity to overcome constraints, classifying them according to whether this capacity is holistic, conditioned or marginal. The capacity to master constraints is perhaps the greatest asset for association life, especially in its development function.

Solutions

Various solutions were proposed by a majority of associations. In fact, only three respondents did not propose solutions to the problems identified. Many respondents present the key solution to politicisation of associational life as the affirmation of the apolitical status or the neutrality of associations. While the respondent for CEBA considered that, as a student union, it has to avoid patronage of any sort and refuse alignment with specific elites, he also felt that it is necessary to identify with all currents of opinion and to work more with the local traditional structures. The Secretary General of CREDEM indicated that the as-

sociation has even already defined its non-political status. The respondent for MBOG LIA, for his part, argued for the accommodation of all shades of political opinion, while Chief Pegngo of ACTEM stated that the association has stuck to its function of cultural revival and to the pursuit of the creation of two administrative districts instead of the call for a Maritime Province that is at the centre of MBOG LIA claims. Scanty or lame as these proposals may be, they point to a necessary step in looking for solutions to a crucial problem which risks compromising an important component of civil society. However, the effectiveness of this approach depends on how lasting they are and whether they take root in the collective conscience of the people.

The solutions advanced to the problem of financing show little originality, although they point to a sense of self-reliance. Associations engage in fund raising campaigns (distribution of letters, the organisation of fund raising galas), and resort to partnerships in development. In this respect, there is a tendency to stay within the limits of financial viability and to jealously guard the association's autonomy. In other words, either the associations stick to the small-scale finances they can raise, or they only associate with partners. This contrasts sharply with associations, non-governmental organisations and common initiative groups created within the context of the liberalisation process whose funding is almost exclusively of external origin, and at times even seems to constitute their only raison d'être (see Enoh Tanjong's study in this volume). This explains the sustainability of the associations in a context where a certain civil society of modern origins has thrived only as a financial colony of big business, principally through NGOs of northern origins acting in many cases just as an outlet for finance from the latter (Yenshu Vubo 1998a:46-47). In this regard, we can say that the home-based associations do not only cope without lavish funding, they have also learnt to cope outside this current of assisted and dependent civil society life.

Concerning managerial problems, respondents mentioned stricter measures to cope with financial mismanagement, to exercise greater supervision, technical evaluation, monitoring and self-evaluation, all of which are measures which seek remedies from within the associations themselves rather than from beyond. This tendency strengthens the drive for autonomy through self-regulatory mechanisms. In no case did respondents mention recourse to legal or judicial procedures or external auditing, which are public and objective mechanisms for coping with problems of this nature. It is likely that recourse to such procedures will compromise the spirit of trust, fraternity, solidarity and sacrifice that is at the basis of this type of association.

The same type of remedial measures are proposed as a way out of the problems of indiscipline and lack of motivation or enthusiasm within associations and the target communities where development projects are implemented. To such problems respondents proposed more education, sensitisation and an encouragement to hard work, thus seeking to preserve the voluntary nature of

the associations. The watchword in this regard is making the people aware of the need to participate rather than be forced to act; in other words encouraging voluntary participation based on a reasoned awareness rather than on blind participation based on coercion. One would conclude that although the associations have an ascriptive basis (home of origin), they do not operate along the ascriptive lines that are characteristic of traditional life. Ascription is only a basic criterion for membership, while participation is expected to be voluntary and based on rational understanding.

To problems of a technical nature respondents reported the increasing resort to feasibility studies or technical assistance prior to project execution. Others proposed the resort to technical expertise where this was necessary but lacking. This is where the community is aware of its obvious limitations and considers itself as primarily a mobilising force. This is equally our observation with rural peoples who indicated the lack of technical expertise as a major limitation (Yenshu Vubo and Fonchingong op cit.:30). As we have noted before there are major areas in which local peoples and associations are lacking and in which they definitely need external support, especially from national governments within whose framework they operate (ibid.). Financing and the provision of expertise are two of these key domains. However, where local people are assisted in these areas, the assistance should not compromise the autonomy of the people in problem identification, organisation and mobilisation. This point helps to explain the following proposals by respondents:

- Development projects should be people-centred, implying that they should not be exclusively technocratic or the affair of experts alone;
- Development projects should be supervised by the community involved, implying the autonomy of the community in its development as opposed to technocratic authority, political influence and the financial weight of external agencies;
- Development projects should be those that cultivate a spirit of communalism, implying that projects that destroy the unity of the community in the name of technical and economic efficiency lose their raison d'être;
- Development projects should be orientated towards self employment and self-sufficiency, thus fostering autonomy and discouraging dependency;
- Development projects should also involve private enterprises, financial institutions and common initiative groups (CIGS), thus filling the gaps that lead to economic and financial dependency. In other words, development projects should not be limited to piece-meal collectivist projects whose financing depends on donations and small-scale levies or dependence on external sources;
- Development should be mental, that is, it should comprise an educational process as opposed to the view that development comes down to infras-

tructure provisioning, which seems to have dominated development activity until recently;

- Development activity should target all categories of people and should be undertaken by people who have the interest of the community at heart and whom the community members trust. In other words, development should be a collective activity whose beneficiaries are not only the greater community but whose leadership is derived from a social contract built on trust. People should not only constantly support development activities both morally and financially. They should have a leadership that is responsible towards them and responsive to their needs and aspirations.

Notes

1. Ebune has identified four such 'improvement unions' created along ethno-regional lines and the geopolitical divide of the British colonial period in Cameroon. These are the Bamenda Improvement Union, the Bakweri Improvement Union, the Mamfe Improvement Union and the Oroko Improvement Union. Empirical evidence also shows that such structures existed at micro-community level.

2. The reference to family has also been observed as being at the basis of association life in Dakar, Senegal (Niang 2000).

3. Braudel (1969:50-51) has stated that certain structures become stable elements over an infinity of generations and even end up as determinants of historical processes by their very long-term duration. This is the fate of structural forms which survive over relatively long periods of time and which are therefore situated at the level of the *longue durée*.

4. For more on this see Yenshu Vubo (1997, 2003) and Austen and Derrick (1999).

5. This is captured in the pidgin English expressions 'Politik na njangi' (politics is reciprocity), or 'you scratch my back I scratch your own' (One good turn deserves another) used by former Prime Minister Simon Achidi Achu. This actually meant that social services were allocated based exclusively on support for the regime.

6. Alone they constitute 23 per cent (85,500,000 out of 363,554,263 CFA) of all expenditures cited.

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