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NGO Involvement in Environmental Protection in the North West Province

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Introduction and Objectives of the Study

The past decade has seen a steady growth in non-governmental organisations at the local, national and international level – along with an increasing interest from both donors and the NGOs themselves in seeking ways to make NGOs more effective. The profile of NGOs has grown among policy-makers, activists, and researchers in both the North and the South. NGOs now feature prominently in discussions on service delivery, advocacy and lobbying, social movements, philanthropy and charity giving, building ‘civil society’, and social entrepreneurship. This rich diversity of NGOs in both the North and the South is widely celebrated, with a growing number of publications devoted to them. Although there are voices challenging the claims which are made for NGOs, these are generally restricted to the context of humanitarian assistance in emergency situations, and NGOs continue to be the ‘flavour of the month’ in development circles.

There has been a general and rising interest among countries on environmental issues, most especially environmental protection, since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) or the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992. In principle, this conference expected countries to recognise the complementary relationship that exists between development and the environment. The challenge of environmental protection was made formal by the Cameroon government’s recognition of NGOs as partners in natural resource management and rural development. The challenge is that NGOs must perform efficiently in realising local, regional, national and global environment plans, which means they must have adequate capacity and resources. This requires an appraisal of the financial means and sustainability of NGOs, of cooperation between NGOs and GOs (Governmental Organisations) in tackling natural resource management, with the focus on the grassroots resource users,

the degree of participation (empowerment), and the global dimension of the activities of NGOs. This chapter seeks to identify NGOs involved in development work and to appraise their input in the environmental protection process in order to establish a base for cooperation between local and international NGOs and to elaborate strategies in achieving sustainability through local resource mobilisation, organisational strengthening and the institutional development of civil society.

Methodology

Data for this study were obtained from the SNV-sponsored project reported by Marion Wiendels (1994), and a study by Ndenecho (2003). Information was gathered from interviews with one representative of each relevant organisation. To be of interest in the framework of this research, an NGO had to meet the following five criteria (Wiendels 1994):

- The organisation is active in the region at the moment, which implies that co-workers are either established on a permanent base, or are playing an important role in enabling organisations which are physically present to execute their activities. To be included an organisation has to have at least one office based in Cameroon.
- The organisation is not a base organisation. A base organisation is defined here as an organisation existing due to the initiative of the target population.
- The organisation is either in direct contact with the target population, or works directly with organisations which are in direct contact with them.
- The organisation aims at the development of the area.
- The organisation is apolitical and non-commercial.

These criteria apply to governmental and non-governmental organisations. An inventory of organisations operating in the domain of rural development and environmental protection in the region was made using an established list of NGOs, a telephone directory, and knowledge of organisations which are active in the region acquired through interviews and field surveys. The organisations are analysed on the basis of size of means, ratio of means, continuity, cooperation, level of integration, objectives, degree of participation, process approach, and international dimension.

The study set out to achieve the following research outputs:

- An inventory of organisations operating in environmental protection and rural development in the region.
- The geographical location of NGOs in the region.
- The degree of spatial concentration of NGOs in the region.
- Typology and roles of NGOs.
- Graphic presentations of NGOs based on the parameters studied.
- Weaknesses and limitations of NGOs.

- The scope for achieving greater efficiency in sustainable environmental management and protection.

A special case was made of the involvement of an international NGO (Helvetas) in watershed management in collaboration with local stakeholders and beneficiaries at local level. This refers to the case of the Tubah watershed protection project.

Characteristics of NGOs

Typology of Development Organisations

The field survey established the following typology of development organisations involved in environmental protection issues. This typology will enable us to evaluate the contribution of NGOs.

- **Membership Organisations (MO):** These are farmers' organisations that are involved in agricultural development and the marketing of produce. The main MOs are the Cameroon Cooperative Credit Union League (CAMCCUL) and North West Cooperative Association (NWCA). MOs mainly serve the interests of their members. The problem with some of these organisations is that for a long time they were organised by government officials rather than by farmers themselves. They were supposed to work for farmers but also implement government policies.
- **Donor organisations targeting communities (DOs):** These organisations are active in poverty reduction programmes at the grassroots. They started by giving aid to people in distress. Unfortunately, most of these have been more successful in instilling a dependency attitude among local people by leading them to expect free inputs, tools and credit at favourable rates rather than in emphasising the importance of improving managerial capacity. The main DOs include the North West Development Authority (MIDENO) and church organisations. In order to raise finance, they sometimes try to create the image that their target group is in a very difficult situation that will not improve without external support. Unfortunately, their target groups include poor people in complex, diverse and risk-prone environments where the agro-ecological and socio-economic situation is very difficult. They evidently lack the capacity to handle environmental and resource management issues under these circumstances. Most of them are isolated while others may assign projects to other organisations.
- **Community based organisations (CBOs):** These are very active in the region and include Farmer Groups, Forest User Groups, Bee Keeping Groups, Tree Nursery Groups, Common Initiative Groups, Villages Development Associations, and socio-cultural and development organisations involved in rural road construction projects, rural water supply schemes, community forest management, watershed protection, provision of basic village socio-economic infrastructure, and the rational use of village natural resources. Unfortunately, they face

the same limitations experienced by grassroots support organisations because they are championed by local and external elites.

- **International NGOs and Public Service Organisations:** These are international support organisations. They help membership organisations, CBOs, and local NGOs in developing countries through financial and material support, training and expertise. These are based in the developed countries but are represented in the study area to provide training and expertise. They also act as a channel to transfer donor assistance to local NGOs, CBOs and membership organisations. Those active in the region include AFVP (Association Française de Volontaires du Progrès), Bird Life International, Food and Agricultural Organisation, Swiss Association for Development and Cooperation (Helvetas), German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), Heifer Project International (HPI), INADES (Institut Africain pour le Développement Economique et Social), Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV), and Plan International. Although operating under different legal statuses these organisations have the common characteristic of possessing high technical capacity and the financial means to implement their policies.

- **Local NGOs:** These are local organisations receiving direct funding from international and Northern NGOs in order to reinforce local civil society through the development of new partnerships. Several of these bodies proliferate in the study area as there has been an emergence of a new generation of local NGO 'contractors' since the 1990s.

Viability of NGOs

International NGOs have more financial resources than local NGOs, DOs and MOs. They promote a great deal of rhetoric about partnership and enhancing civil society as they channel the majority of their funds to local NGOs through semi-contractual arrangements for service delivery projects. There is an exaggerated emphasis on specific sectors and services to the detriment of a wider strategy of funding long-term goals, which cut across sectors, such as poverty reduction and strengthening civil society. Unfortunately, these funds are channelled to a very small number of local NGOs, thus several local NGOs present misshapen organisational profiles. The lack of financial means threatens continuity, leads to poor cooperation among the NGO community, and to a poor integrative approach, participation, and process approach by several local NGOs. The local NGOs have no international dimension.

Membership organisations such as CAMCCUL, NWCA and Bamenda Vegetable Cooperation (BVC) have considerable means at their disposal and reach many people in their areas of operation. CAMCCUL is limited only to the rural finance sector and isolated in its organisational network. However, its influence in rural savings and credit generation is enormous. NWCA used to have a large impact in the development process for it had the monopoly in the coffee

trade during the period when world prices were high. At the moment, NWCA faces severe problems in meeting its obligations. The impact of NWCA has decreased considerably. Local NGOs are limited in their sphere of activities as a consequence of their weak organisational profiles. In contrast, international NGOs are very active in the area as a result of their high organisational profiles. Membership organisations except BVC cover the entire region. The BVC is based mainly in Mezam. The spatial influence of international NGOs is a result of their policy of support to local NGOs through financial assistance and the adoption of local NGOs and CBOs as co-workers.

The Tubah Watershed Project: A Model of Collaboration Between NGOs and Local Communities

For a period of thirty years, the international NGO, Helvetas (Swiss Association for Development and Cooperation), together with the Community Development Department (CDD) in the Ministry of Agriculture and a few local NGOs have constructed about 350 rural water schemes and 150 water points in the North West, South West and West Provinces, serving about 1.2 million rural people. The CDD and NGOs, as partners of Helvetas at execution level, design, plan, implement and monitor the performance of village-based water maintenance committees, which operate and maintain the schemes. Helvetas and its partners started a comprehensive process of information and sensitisation on improved water resource management for water maintenance committees, traditional councils and regional authorities. The villages are the project stakeholders and through their water committees (WMC) and caretakers mobilise local people to contribute in kind and cash for construction, maintenance and operation. Bigger villages require river intakes and water treatment for which sedimentation tanks and slow sand filters (SSF) are designed and constructed. Water intakes are classified as land of common interest and are controlled by local authorities like village and traditional councils. However, with increased agricultural activity in most intake areas and watersheds, water contamination in small streams becomes serious. The Tubah Project constitutes thirty years of experience in watershed protection by Helvetas. Some ten years after initiation, the benefits are already being harvested from this project.

The physical and economic benefits which will result from watershed improvement or improvement in land use practices include such matters as forest conservation, forest management, afforestation, grazing controls, agroforestry and soil conservation. The NGO strategies for watershed management derived from this study include:

- Development of local institutions: Formation of farmers' groups and federations in the programme areas as well as the formation of project and programme committees and training.

- **Active participation by the target population:** There is a clear definition of roles of various population groups, a participatory approach for planning decision-making, sharing responsibilities, promotion and communication. This also applies to equal access to benefits for all programme participants and active participation of all in the learning process. Women are empowered in land use management and production. This is accompanied by the development of self-help potential for the target population (formation of common initiative groups and creation of alternative income generation).
- **Conflict management:** Forums and mechanisms of negotiation have been developed. This requires the setting up of a comprehensive and permanent monitoring system to allow proper control of activities in target areas.

The role of NGOs, local communities and civil society is crucial in achieving sustainable watershed resource management. The strengths of NGOs in this direction are impressive but can be exaggerated. Local institution building has proved difficult and it is common for projects to fail when NGO staff have departed. A key issue is how to build on local successes in providing services nationally. The danger is that Northern NGOs will be used even more actively as channels for donor assistance, which would threaten to suffocate the flexibility, independence, and low bureaucratic costs that have made local NGOs effective. Helvetas is working alongside the government to develop the capacity of national NGOs. Training, technical assistance, networking to disseminate technical information among local NGOs and other activities are being pursued. However, it is difficult for local NGOs to know when financial support will be extended to them by northern NGOs like Helvetas. If it is too early, it may weaken the self-help motivation. If it is too late, it frustrates attempts to move ahead with schemes for water supply.

The issue of sustainability and independence of local NGOs therefore needs to be addressed. Partnership and participation are as important in the relationship between NGOs and the beneficiary communities as they are in those between the NGOs and the government. If projects are to be sustainable and yield long-term benefits, communities must be more explicitly involved in design and implementation and in defining their own contribution.

Most local NGOs operating in the region have sometimes unwittingly incorporated old-style management ideas such as strategic planning – now dismissed by development workers as having failed to live up to its promise when it was developed in the 1970s – rather than adopting the most up-to-date ideas. The most up-to-date mainstream management theory and practice is now concerned that NGOs themselves should incorporate flexible work teams, reduce hierarchies, and build on organisational values and cultures. This should improve their effectiveness and generate new ideas and approaches – ones rooted in different cultures and values, and in a genuinely developmental approach to overcoming obstacles to positive social change.

Discussion and Conclusion

The community of NGOs and civil society organisations is now far larger than it was a decade ago, as it is increasingly being felt that they have more advantages than disadvantages compared with government agencies which perform similar tasks. Donors and national governments therefore direct an increasing part of their funds to NGOs, which increases the likelihood of dependency on external funding. It also poses the risk of being more responsive to donors' agendas than to the need of their constituencies.

The issue of the long-term sustainability of NGOs is real. There is the fear that agencies funding NGOs in resource poor societies, where there is no evidence of medium-term capacity to absorb these costs, are simply reinforcing what some have termed the 'global soup kitchen', or the globalisation of social welfare. There is therefore a need to focus attention towards the goal of sustainability through local resource mobilisation. As of now there is no evidence in the country of such resource mobilisation through tax-based state funding, local philanthropic action or income-generating schemes. Under such circumstances sustainability is simply a myth. On the contrary, local NGOs are noted for their dependence on diplomatic services and perpetual support from international donor organisations.

With globalisation and international trade, NGOs have become increasingly influential in world affairs and are consulted by both governments and international organisations. These organisations exert a significant impact on the social, political and economic life of their target populations. However, there is the question of sustainability as local NGOs in Cameroon derive most of their inspiration and resources from foreign NGOs. In this way both foreign and local NGOs serve as agents of re-colonisation rather than as liberators, as they pose as new missionaries.

NGOs encounter a number of problems. Some local NGOs that gain access to official funds through related government projects geared at rural poverty alleviation report that they encounter bureaucratic bottle-necks in their functioning, which in turn may create room for masquerading to gain access to official funds. The majority of local organisations suffer from a weak organisational network. There is a need to appreciate the issues surrounding capacity building beyond technical and sectoral aims. Capacity building must contribute to the long-term organisational strengthening, or the institutional development, of civil society as a whole.

Local NGOs also suffer from management problems. NGO leaders and staff are sometimes reluctant to think about organisational questions because it might interfere with their primary task of using almost all funds for working with poor people rather than spending money on administrative questions. A second set of problems revolves around the view that many NGOs are established by people searching for alternatives to mainstream thinking and there is sometimes

the feeling that management and administration, with its association with the business and the public sectors, is something NGOs could do without. Some NGOs have experienced rapid growth and change. Organisations which started out as small, informal structures in which management issues could be dealt with on an ad hoc, informal basis may grow in size and develop more complex, multi-dimensional programmes, and suddenly find that they need new ideas, systems and procedures to cope. Finally, as local NGOs have grown closer to official donors they have been required to develop new systems of accountability and their effectiveness has been questioned and challenged. This has led to the feeling that some of the impetus for the new interest in NGO management has come from the North, and has taken the form of an imposed marginalisation rather than being part of a local NGO's own agenda.

As a result of the above factors, there is the need for NGOs to confront the issue of their sustainability and to elaborate new management models.

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