

# **THE CONCEPT OF SELF-RELIANCE IN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES IN THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

The Grassfields of Cameroon is a fertile ground for self-help efforts. This paper examines the resurgence role Village Development Associations (VDAs) are playing in national and community development. Community members are increasingly shouldering the adverse consequences of the economic downturn and the growing inability of the state to provide economic and social development by initiating, mobilising and galvanising their own resources in the quest for improving their standard of living. The reliance on indigenous technology and local human resources has led to overwhelming popular participation in community-driven development.

*Key words: grasslands, self-reliance, community development, local participation, village development associations*

## **INTRODUCTION**

A notable feature of the crisis racing through Cameroon has been its overwhelming impact on the vast rural population, subjecting it to unprecedented economic and social dislocation. Many rural areas are finding it difficult to cope with the decline. The situation has been worsened by the increasing inability of the state to respond effectively and adequately to the rural crisis. The worsening problem of resource scarcity in sub-Saharan African dictates that governments can no longer rely on conventional means to successfully address the basic needs of their populations. Community participation has been advanced, and in fact tried, as a strategy that can be potentially viable in complementing efforts to meet the needs (Njoh 2002).

The stagnation and undiminished scale of poverty has given rise to numerous strategies and initiatives at the grassroots level to help cope with the decline. It is against this backdrop that some village development associations will be examined since their contribution towards meeting the basic needs of the local population and the sustainability of local economies is overstated. As Gooneratne and Mbilinyi (1992) put it, confronted with growing poverty and economic stagnation or depression in the 1980s and early 1990s, self-reliance

has been advanced as a viable alternative strategy to “dependent development” and donor-led “structural adjustment” in developing countries.

Self-reliance is considered not “merely a necessity but a matter of survival” (Galtung et al., 1980). Indigenous development initiatives have experienced upsurge in the Grasslands. The size, scope and function of these inward-looking strategies of development will be detailed, indicating the essential features for their proper functioning. In fact, the population of the Grassfields possesses the creativity to adapt new techniques and knowledge to their local realities (Acho-chi, 1998). Development literature is replete with cases of communal efforts wherein the economy of affection in which both town dwellers and villagers are held together in webs of kinship and tribal obligation contributes inordinately to basic survival, social maintenance and development (Hyden, 1983).

This study thus set out to analyse the evolution and activities of some communities in local development endeavours within the Grasslands of Cameroon. In addition, the study also seeks to determine the ability of these communities to provide collective security through self-reliant efforts against the backdrop of economic restructuring in the country since the late 1980s.

## The geographical context of the research

Cameroon is located in Central Africa. It has a population of 16.2 million with high densities recorded in the cities and the Grassfields area, where most of the population are rural dwellers.

The Grassfields region of Cameroon is quite a large area in both size and population. This region falls within the western highland region of Cameroon and is characterised by savannah vegetation. It is designated grasslands because a greater proportion of the area is covered by grassland than forest. The part of the Grassfields in this study is limited to the Bamenda grassfields, which embodies most of the North West province. The region is characterised by common cultural and traditional traits, socialisation processes and other distinct physical and economic features.

Based on trends observed in the literature on community development and the geographical realities of the Grassfields of Cameroon, data collection and analysis for this study are based on three guiding hypotheses:

- Village development associations are playing a greater role in the development drive of the Western grassfields;
- The contribution of the elite and women is an important component of self-reliant development in the Grassfields of Cameroon; and
- The harsh effects of implementation of the Structural Adjustment programme and diminished state intervention have fostered inward-looking development strategies.

## 1. METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

The uniformity of the human and economic landscape of the Grassfields allows for random sampling and survey techniques to be applied for data collection. The analysis is therefore based primarily on findings from interviews with members of Village Development Associations (VDAs) and traditional councils conducted in Abebung, Mbemi and Pinyin villages of the Grassfields. This is augmented with a review of secondary data on self-reliant efforts in some villages of the region and beyond which are incorporated for a comparative analysis.

The choice of these villages is guided by information contained in existing literature. These villages have shown a successful mobilisation of local resources through the creation of local autonomous structures that liaise with other village development associations outside the village. The elites' role is a strong determinant in the success and follow up of projects in these villages. In addition to all these factors, these villages are located in administrative divisions of the area; they share common locally realised projects and the different VDAs were created at different times.

A common questionnaire and interview guide on community participation in self-help projects was administered in the chosen villages followed by focus group discussions with some members and representatives of local institutions like schools, health units and women's groups, that have also contributed to these local development initiatives in one way or the other. There was a series of discussions with the stakeholders of the different VDAs, government community development officers and NGOs operating in the area on the strategies and management of projects and the level of networking among them. These field visits provided the opportunities to visit and appraise the projects so far and to observe how debates are conducted in some of the meetings.

The data collected have been analysed both qualitatively and quantitatively and discussed in line with the research hypotheses. Quantitative data have been presented in the form of tables and spatial phenomena illustrated by the use of maps and comparative discussions using materials from related literature.

### 1.1 THE CONCEPT OF SELF-RELIANCE

Self-reliance is one of the bases of effective community development in Cameroon as it is in most of Sub-Saharan Africa. In fact, the concept of self-reliance is located centrally within the discourse of community development and is connected to related concepts like self-help, mutual-help, indigenous participation and rural development. It advocates the need for people to improve their condition using local initiatives and resources in their own hands. The concept is fast being accepted as a new formula for community development. Its widespread acceptance in the development planning of most African countries

has the tendency to give greater stimulus and cohesiveness to community development in these countries (Anyanwu, 1992).

Anyanwu (1992) contends that in most African countries community development has depended significantly on voluntary cooperative efforts. This follows a traditional trait that clearly underscores the virtue of self-reliance. This explains the emerging trend in community development, which sees it as an important point of take-off for better living. The emphasis is to involve groups of people in planned programmes from which they may gain skills that will enable them to cope more successfully with the problems of their everyday life. Self-reliance is thus “development on the basis of a country’s (region’s) own resources, involving its populations based on the potentials of its cultural values and traditions”(Galtung 1980). Communities and individual people define their own development according to their own needs, values and aspirations (Preiswerk, 1980).

Local-level development provides a major force in activating the utilization of local resources (land, water, labour) and therefore constitutes one of the most effective methods of promoting people’s participation in determining their own development. The needs for local alternatives and self-reliance have been voiced in more explicit terms by other scholars. For example, Brett (1988) has called for cooperative and voluntary alternatives, while Sandbrook (1985) has emphasised the need for “small-scale community solutions”. In its fundamental sense, self-reliance is defined as a state of mind that regards one’s own mental and material resources as the primary stock to draw on in the pursuit of one’s objectives, and finds emotional fulfilment not only in achieving the objectives but of having achieved them primarily by using one’s own resources.

In the villages under study, the community has contributed to developing its infrastructure and social services. Self-reliance in community development demands that community members apply their knowledge and skills to the resources at their disposal. This ties in with Anyanwu’s observations that the development of related skills and attitudes of a people can enable them to satisfy their basic needs, to grow self-reliant, and to minimise precarious dependence on agencies external to their communities.

The concept of self-reliance does not differ significantly from the principles of self-help and mutual help. The self-help philosophy is closely related to self-reliance as defined by Ghari (1980) that self-reliance through cooperation is now being promoted throughout the developing world for no egalitarian society should be chronically unable to meet a self-defined, local need.

Self-help enables the local people to exploit to their advantage resources, which would otherwise lie dormant and thereby perpetuate the ignorance and poverty of their community, by making use of the under-utilised labour; the instance self-help for community development can increase the competence and confidence of a community in handling its affairs. The habit of self-help is a prerequisite for survival in the modern world (Anyanwu 1992). Self-help initiatives enable the people to look inwards by rallying local resources and efforts. This is especially appropriate to the concept of community development,

which stresses the importance of people increasing their sense of responsibility, and looking assistance as just supplementary, but never replacing popular initiatives or local efforts. The emphasis is on democratising with reliance on what people can do for themselves. The principle of self-help incorporates into the community development process the means of offering ordinary citizens the opportunity to share in making important decisions about their living conditions (Anyanwu 1992). This approach echoes the people-centeredness of community development-attempts at satisfying felt needs. This entails community participation at all levels of the project, a tendency that is noticeable in the communities under study.

## 1.2 SELF-RELIANCE IN THE CAMEROON GRASSFIELDS

Self-reliant development is not a new phenomenon in the Grassfields of Cameroon. It is enshrined in the customs and traditions of the people of this area. Before European imperialism in Cameroon, genuine community participation could be seen in the construction and maintenance of palaces, village to farm roads, inter village roads, and shrines. The British Colonial Authority introduced the system of 'Indirect Rule', which was intended to be a continuum of the "old order". Through this British colonial policy, the position of the traditional authority was strengthened in the area. The British ruling the people through this traditional authority had the capacity to rally the inhabitants for local development. But the privileged position enjoyed by traditional authorities in the Grassfields area did not obtain in French Cameroon where the policy of 'assimilation' prevailed. In the former British Cameroon that retained significant political and economic autonomy, the existence of all sorts of local associations were much more numerous than in the Francophone part of the country (Geschiere, 1995). Moreover, the local development approaches in both the British and French Cameroon were different even in appellation; 'community development' and 'action communautaire' respectively (Yenshu 1997) prior to independence in 1960. The traditional hierarchical institutions with the chiefs at the helm were a heritage of British colonial rule. Geschiere (1995) observed that in the adjacent part of the former French Colony - Bamileke part of the Western grassfields - such associations were relatively strong as well. The chief are still at the centre of an elaborate set of more or less esoteric associations around their courts. He further notes that in the diaspora, migrants from the same chiefdom created pseudo-traditional associations in order to foster cooperation in their new surroundings and retain the link with their chief.

It is no surprise therefore that village community projects (VCPs) realised through popular participation are relatively common, well managed, and successful in this part of Cameroon. Although the post-independence period witnessed an increase in local participation, mostly in the execution of

government initiated and sponsored projects, the 1990s have seen an unprecedented avalanche of self-reliant projects through enthusiastic and committed local participation within the Grassfields. This turning point in development and assertiveness of village development associations (VDAs) from the 1980's is a partial response to the economic crisis that hit the country during this time and the stringent adjustment measures that were later implemented by the government in 1990 following the prescriptions of the World Bank and IMF.

While the economic crisis reduced government foreign exchange earnings and thus its ability to accomplish major infrastructural developments in the country, adjustment measures also led to direct cuts in state spending on such vital sectors education, health and rural amenities which needed serious attention. The situation was clear: the population needed these services and government could no longer provide them.

Self-help-driven development has proved its usefulness as an easy, all-on-board and results-oriented approach to contemporary modes of translating boardroom ideas into meaningful development at least in this focus area. It is very possible to transcribe their novel approach into a standard method of intervention in micro financing development projects in remote rural areas. The village development associations in the grassfields have democratic structures with an executive board that works in collaboration with committees and sub-committees depending on the nature of the project. It is worthy to note that congresses and mini-congresses are organised annually for stocktaking of ongoing projects and contributions requested for other projects in the pipeline. During such grand foras, traditional dishes, sketches, dances, exhibitions are organised as a form of cultural inclusiveness and fund-raising. Contributions collected from the chapters and branches represented throughout the national territory are presented to the congress by the branch presidents or their representatives. This is the operational structure with most VDAs in the region that have very vibrant branches in major cities of the country. Members are levied when there is a project at hand and the elite because of their privileged position are requested to contribute generously. This may also take the form of the organisation of traditional dances in order to raise the much-needed funds. This is the case of the Mankon Cultural and development Association (MACUDA) - Buea chapter that recently organised a fundraising gala geared at the completion of a library project in the village. Jua (2002) notes that the first congress of the NADA in 1984 was attended by hundreds of people living and working outside of the Njinkom Area. The "white paper creating the association stated succinctly: "Unless a people takes its development into their own hands, nobody will do it for them" is instructive of the centrality of self-reliance in the development area of the grasslands. They raised more than US \$10,000 with more than \$8,000 of the total coming from people living in urban areas. As seen in the VDAs in the study, the contributions of the branches are very vital to the overall implementation of identified projects.

Community participation in liaison with NGOs is an added dimension of community development in the grassfields. An International NGO like the Swiss Association for Int. Development (HELVETAS) is heralded as a partner in self-reliant development in the Cameroon grassfields. Their intervention in pipe borne water schemes, road rehabilitation and development of water catchments in collaboration with the communities is remarkable. They work with village development associations and other grassroots structures in the maintenance of pipelines, digging of trenches, supplying sand, stones and laying of pipes for distribution of water to quarters in the various localities. The water management committees that are an auxiliary of the Village Development Associations are very instrumental in handling problems that relate to distribution and maintenance of water points. In the case of Lower Mbot (Donga-Mantung Division) women were levied 500frs and men 1000frs for the maintenance of its water system. In Mbinkar (a nearby locality), the Village Development Association is very supportive in road rehabilitation through cleaning of culverts, chopping of grass around major roads and the filling of potholes. Membership contributions constitute an important source of start-off capital for execution of projects. The case of Ndu, a locality in the Northwestern grassfields is glaring where the identified catchment area had to be protected from encroachment through the planting of particular tree species (pear, orange, African panaxia). In order to develop the pumping station, women were levied 2000frs and men 4000frs. The modus operandi is slightly different with the NADA where statutorily, membership contributions were fixed at 6000 francs CFA for people living in urban areas, 500frs and 250frs for the village male and female adult respectively. Members are however, encouraged to contribute as much as they can (Jua, 2002).

The elites constitute a strong force in community development endeavours in the grassfields as elsewhere in Cameroon. Since the game of politics is determined by the lobbying capacity of the region, its elite plays a central role in canvassing for resources from the central government. They also use existing village/community associations and committees as a political base and back up for their actions. Their support to community development initiatives is premised on the readiness of the community members to reciprocate when such illustrious sons or daughters' need to garner political support especially during elections. Jua (2002) states that the over-riding reason to create NADA (1984) was spearheaded by some of its elites who wanted to reverse the trend of the economic meltdown and to promote the prominence of Njinikom as a collective. As seen in the showcases in this study, the elites occupy a prominent position as far as turning the table in community development activities. Their contributions are usually very high and their share is equally very determinant in the execution of projects. During contributions, elites see this as a means to social promotion and prestige and therefore contribute generously (Nkwi, 1997). The village of Nkouondja in the Western grassfields is a case in point. The village Development Committee made up the shortage in contribution towards their water supply project by sending an emissary to a neighbouring country (Gabon)

with a strong representation of the elites who were working there. The emissary returned with 500,000frs CFA, more than the amount expected (IRC, 2002). However, their participation is against the backdrop of the prevailing philosophy in official circles where it is common place to argue 'politics na njangu' (politics is a game of give and take or a quid pro quo, Jua 2002), the elite have sabotaged or stifled associations especially if they do not share similar political stripes. The polarization and return favours expected by elites has created unnecessary tension leading to the dysfunction of some Village Development Associations. As funds become unavailable or dry up, dissenting voices creep in and these financial constraints has forced some Village Development Associations to scale back on identified projects. This also has dampening effects on the enthusiasm of community members. Jua (2002) explains the implosion of NADA with the decentring of the development goals of the Association and its politicization became a new ground for political struggle among the elites and political parties.

## 2. THE PLACE OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION IN LOCAL DEVELOPMENT

Community participation is the secret of the success of self-help projects in the Grassfields. Participation is both in kind and in cash. There is usually enthusiasm from the community to participate in projects since the adoption of projects is arrived at through consensus and these projects must meet the aspirations of all classes of the society. The example of the Abebung Health Project, which cost about 12 million francs, C.F.A reveals that community financial contributions are determined by the ability of the individual to contribute. The level of contribution is a factor of where an individual lives, his/her social and economic status. A planning or ad hoc committee usually sets this amount, which is representative of all the socio-economic and political strata of the village. This representation ensures that group interest is respected before the issue is brought before the general assembly or congress for approval. In other places, just as Anyanwu (1992) noted with the Alara's palace project, a fundraising committee is set up which proposes the levy for each individual.

Participation in community development is the cornerstone of the development process. Concerns for reduction of inequalities and for alleviation of poverty drew attention to the rural areas where the majority of the world's poor reside. Among the various objectives and strategies of development Bazlul (1994) cites people's participation at the grass-root level as being pivotal in reducing both poverty and inequality. As a corollary to Bazlul (ibid), Wignaraja (1984) considers people's participation to be critical in achieving the objectives of development as he believes that it is a pretence to think that the crises in the developing countries can be overcome or that the reshaping of societies and the development of its rural areas can be undertaken without the participation of the

people, particularly the large numbers who are poor. Goulet (1989) argues among other things that participation by intended beneficiaries is an indispensable feature of all forms of development

Wignaraja (1984) emphasizes the extent of people's participation by observing that the rural poor need to become increasingly aware of the socio-economic reality around them, of the forces that keep them in poverty, and of the possibility of bringing about change in their conditions through their own collective actions. This constitutes a process of self-transformation through which they grow and mature as human beings. In this sense participation is also a basic human need. This is manifested in the voluntary contributions either in cash or in kind from community members.

The UN Food and Agricultural Organisation (1979) also emphasize that participation by the people in the institutions and systems which govern their lives is a basic human right and also essential for realignment of political power in favour of disadvantaged groups and for social and economic development. Due to disillusionment with previous development strategies, participation by communities has become critical to the development of the countryside through popular support and local action. Cohen and Uphoff (1980) maintain that the main thrust behind the concern for participation grew out of disillusionment with previous approaches to development, buttressed by diffuse liberal/democratic sentiments.

This disillusionment explains why the World Bank on its part holds that community participation can be a means for ensuring that development projects in developing countries reach the poorest in the most efficient and cost-effective way. Participation consequently expects even the poorest to share in the cost as well as the benefits of community development. That is why in the villages under study, the elements of local action are related to local participation efforts by community members aimed at building the community and improving the welfare and standard of living of the people. Bazlul's (1994) conceptualisation of participation is also relevant. He looks at the term 'participation' as the involvement by more than a few individuals who are involved in a situation or action to improve their welfare or to achieve some other desired goals. It is a process, which involves people at the grass-roots level in collective actions, taking initiatives in spontaneous, creative activities. Rahman (1981) emphasizes the importance of participation: "this is what makes the process of people's own as opposed to the people being mobilized, led or directed, by outside forces."

Participation and community development have been identified as key concepts in development with the emphasis on "the direct involvement of ordinary people in local affairs (Midgley et al 1986)." The stream of development thinking points to participation as a process of empowering those who were previously excluded from achieving power; that is, "power in terms of access to, and control of the resources necessary to protect livelihood (Oakley and Marsden 1984)." These concepts are in tandem with the efforts of communities to initiate and realise that their projects (Table 1) based on available resources.

This means that a community can include a group of people spread over different places, who can still be closely in touch and able to plan and act in concert (Anyanwu 1992). In this way, the community remains an area of social coherence and is based on locality and community sentiment.

Scholars and policy makers have expressed diverse views on the concept of community development. Gary Craig's (1998) view is tied to the notion of promoting community participation as a means of enhancing the development process. He cites the Brundland Commission (WCED, 1997), which enlists effective citizen participation as one of the preconditions to sustainable development. The Human Development Report (UNDP, 1993) echoes the imperative of people participating in their own development, remarking that people's participation is becoming the central issue in the face of current challenges for development. The Mutengene Water Supply Project is a notable experiment of community participation and the experience of self-help in water service delivery to impoverished populations in Cameroon. The various phases of the project when it was initially hatched in 1959 to date shows the dire need of the inhabitants to continuously furnish the town with potable water supply amidst hurdles. The ad hoc committee set up for the realisation of the project-conducted feasibility, studies leading to the identification of a natural spring. Local residents had to contribute to defray the cost of engineering, technical/managerial services and construction materials (see Njoh, 2002). They were assisted by financial grants from governmental and some non-governmental organisations. The levying Scheme for the Mutengene Water Project of the Southwest province of Cameroon is slightly different from what obtains in the grasslands. Residents were grouped into two classes. For scheme one, businessmen were levied 500frs, Formal sector workers; 500frs, Informal sector men; 400frs and informal sector women; 200frs. For scheme two, businessmen were levied 1000frs, Formal sector men; 1000frs, Businesswomen; 800frs, formal sector women, 800frs; Informal sector men, 600frs and Informal sector women; 400frs (Njoh 2002).

## 2.1 VDAS AS DEVELOPMENT AGENTS IN THE GRASSFIELDS

The Pinyin Development Organisation (PDO), the Abebung Development and Cultural Association (ADCA) and the Njindom Cultural and Development Association (NJICUDA) were founded in 1974, 1978 and 1994 respectively. The goal of these VDAs is to bring development to their respective areas through self-reliance, to act as pressure groups vis-à-vis the state and to preserve their cultural values, identity, and unity. These institutions have undertaken concerted efforts to satisfy the pressing needs of their communities. Priority projects nonetheless differ from one community to another depending on the physical reality and the socio-economic infrastructure already existing in the area and its surroundings.

The construction of bridges attracts a lot of attention within the Grassfields. This is because of the physical geography of the region, which is hilly, with many streams forming a number of valleys. The topography is a major obstacle to inter-village transportation especially in facilitating access to village markets or to sharing available social amenities like schools, which are not found in all the communities. In Abebung for example, before the construction of the Uknaw and Afesoh bridges, women could not cross over to farms when it rained because of floods nor return from neighbouring markets, while children could not go to school. Cases of children drowning after severe storms were often recorded. The distance from the village to areas having facilities such as health centres and schools greatly influenced the choice of activity to embark on. Where schools and health centres are close to the villages, they are given less preference than when they are far away. For example, the nearest health units from Abebung and Pinyin are about 16km and 25km respectively. This distance is too long and attracted community attention to this aspect hence the 1978 and 1998 health projects for Pinyin and Abebung respectively. On the other hand Mbemi is a short distance from the public and private health units (Mbengwi Divisional Hospital and the Presbyterian Hospital in Acha): This accounts for the fact that a health Project is not an urgent issue to the community (table 3).

The VDAs are structured with a central coordinating body and sub-branches represented wherever members of the community are found in the country. These VDAs operate in a specified cultural context and the cultural setting is influential in creating an open atmosphere of support, accountability and transparency.

Due to the limited resources of the VDAs, projects are prioritised and not more than one project is engaged in at a time. Such earmarked projects are agreed upon during annual meetings in a collective reflection. When projects are short listed, the executive communicates to members through the various branches who do the feasibility and costing in various sub committees. These regional development schemes adopted by village associations remain potent forces of rural development. Whether they are code-named 'Association d'elites', 'Amical des ressortissants', cultural and development association, Union meetings, Yenshu (1997) notes that they inspire grassroots initiative and is most evident in rural water supply, farm-to-market roads, and to some extent, agricultural extension programmes (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Self Reliant projects realised by Pinyin, Abebung and Mbemi VDAs Between 1978 and 1999.

	<b>Pinyin Development Organisation (PDO 1974)</b>	<b>Abebung Development and Cultural Association (ACADA 1978)</b>	<b>Njindum Cultural and Development Association (NJICUDA 1994)</b>
<b>Project Area</b>			
<b>Health</b>	Health Centre Building (completed in 1978)	Health Centre Building, 1998	None
<b>Water</b>	Lower Pinyin Pipe borne Water Project	Abebung Village water project	Zang Tembeng Tondig Water Project, 1995
<b>Bridges/Roads</b>	Several Road maintenance projects executed	Afesop Bridge, 1984 Ukaw Bridge, 1980	Mbemi- Njindom Bridge, 1999
<b>Schools</b>	GHS Nkwang classrooms building project	The new Primary school Block, 1993	GTC Njindom community Block
<b>Village Halls</b>	Two palaces	Abebung Fon's Palace and community hall	MECUDA Hall Njindom, 1995
<b>Electrification</b>	-	-	Feasibility study under way
<b>Telephone</b>	-	-	-
<b>Modern Markets</b>	-	-	-

*Source: Fieldwork, 2000.*

It can be observed that all the VDAs no matter when they were founded are involved in common project areas (provision of water, roads, schools and community hall) reinforcing social cohesion and the attachment to traditional values. This is vividly observed in the case of the building of village halls. One of the distinct characteristics of Grassfields communities is that they are organised around very powerful traditional chiefdoms or fondoms ruled by Chiefs and Fons. These traditional authorities lived in palaces with large halls, which are used to perform traditional rites and ceremonies. This explains why as part of a socialisation process of a people, palace or hall projects figure strongly in the development agenda of Grassfields communities. The Bamilekes of the western grassfields have very magnificent palaces that are off-shots of community development initiatives.

The records of the three VDAs studied revealed that the elites played a very crucial role in the financing and management of self-reliant projects. The commitment of the youth and women as vital instruments of development was also evident. This dedication of elite, youth and women is a common feature in most of West Africa. Anyanwu (1992) observed that in the Alara's Palace

project in Ondo State in western Nigeria, both elites and youth provided their labour and expertise free in the areas of architecture, carpentry and others during the implementation of project, in addition to their financial contributions. This trend of active participation of youth and women is observed in the case the financing of the Abebung health centre where youth and housewives contributed 19.9% of the total contribution from their Yaounde branches (Table 2). This amount excludes working class women who in this context are categorised alongside men of the same rank, far above the level of housewives who in most cases are not involved in any income-generating activities.

**Table 2.** Financial contributions toward the Abebung community health centre by the Yaounde Branch of ADCA, September 1996.

	<b>Number of members</b>	<b>% of Branch membership</b>	<b>Amount in FCFA</b>	<b>% of Branch contribution</b>
<b>Elite</b>	15	13.8	510,000	49.4
<b>Business Operators</b>	18	16.5	216,000	20.9
<b>Youths</b>	26	23.9	120,000	11.6
<b>Housewives</b>	30	27.5	75,000	7.3
<b>Others</b>	20	18.3	112,000	10.8
<b>Total</b>	109	100	1,033,000	100

*Source: ADCA 1996 Development Register, Yaounde Branch.*  
 NB.700FCFA = 1US \$ (as of June 2001).

Most VDAs were formed in response to the government's inability and failure to bring basic infrastructure and amenities to these communities. Field study revealed that most of the projects realised so far by VDAs in the Grassfields were undertaken during the period of economic recession and Structural Adjustment programme (begun in 1987), a period during which government's spending power was seriously limited. These projects are often far away from existing public and private facilities. As can be observed in the study area indicated in table 3, most of the existing social amenities are as far off as 30Km in the case of closest post primary school for Abebung and 25Km in the case of health facilities for Pinyin. This further cements these VDAs as an important vehicle of development to remote, inaccessible areas.

**Table 3.** Distances from the nearest existing services from three sampled communities.

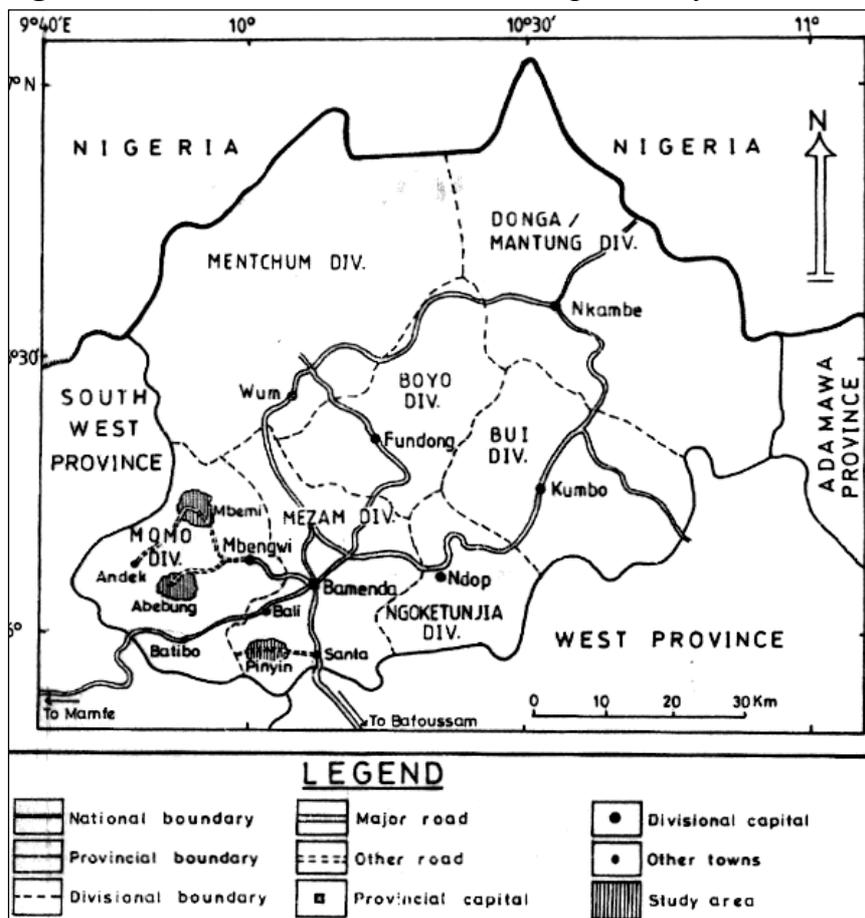
<b>Communities</b>	<b>Private health services</b>	<b>Public health Services</b>	<b>Pipe borne Water</b>	<b>Post primary school</b>
<b>Abebung</b>	12 km	20 km	25 km	30 km
<b>Mbemi</b>	3 km	2 km	8 km	10 km
<b>Pinyin</b>	25km	None	25 km	25 km

*Source: Fieldwork, 2000.*

Self-reliant development provides basic community needs such as water, health facilities, roads, etc. while projects like electricity and telephone, which are not of primary importance, are not considered priority projects. This partly accounts for the enthusiastic participation of all strata of the society, particularly the poor, in self-reliant projects. It was observed that projects implemented by VDAs easily attracted a lot of support from NGOs and other foreign bodies because these VDAs were well structured and organised to continue with the post completion management of projects. Furthermore, they can provide the initial funds for their projects, which are often required by most donors as a sign of community determination to help themselves.

Finally, there is a high degree of information flow within VDAs which greatly accounts for the success of most of their projects and the fact that the community is implicated in all stages of the project (from conception to post implementation phase) (Figure 1). It is worth mentioning that the fraternal links binding the elements/members of VDAs is a strong cohesive force as is the adherence and loyalty to a strong traditional ruler, who is revered. Most chairpersons of VDAs are elderly persons of high moral and irreproachable character and are residents in the village. They are also expected to work in collaboration with the Fon by keeping him abreast with the state of development projects.

Figure 1. The North-West Province showing the study areas.



## 2.2 THE RELEVANCE OF GRASSROOTS INITIATIVES

Self-reliant development organisations are currently the foremost agents of development in the Grassfields of Cameroon. They are well structured along cultural and village lines, executing micro-development projects that range from the construction of culverts to giant bridges, and projects such as water schemes, community health posts, and community halls. Their emergence, resurgence, organisation and success stories in improving the standard of living of the rural masses cannot go unnoticed especially when we consider the fact that similar organisations and projects are less common in other regions.

The emergence of self-reliant development organisations in the Grassfields revolves around a common date that is the late 1970s and early 80s. These self-reliant organisations have elected bodies that run their affairs outside the traditional council, the chiefs and the notables or the villagers who are usually consulted as advisers. The existence of separate executing bodies are basically to ensure efficiency in contacts, raising of funds and management of projects in a rapidly changing world. It was observed that these VDAs of the Grassfields have branches all over the country where members of their community are found. These branches have executives, who collect dues and contributions from members. They act as delegates in national executives and planning committees, thereby facilitating the task of bringing resources and ideas together.

The absence of health units, water supply schemes, school buildings, roads, etc., that should have been provided by government in Abebung, Mbemi and Pinyin (Table 3), for example, led the population to organise themselves to provide their community with these amenities. None of the areas studied had any basic amenities before the formation of their VDAs. Therefore, where the government failed to provide, the people resorted to self-help development efforts.

The profit motive is the driving force of private entrepreneurs. They rarely operate where profits are not envisaged let alone where they cannot cover their cost of production. Most grassfield villages have populations that do not exceed 3000 inhabitants, except where there is an administrative unit. This population is usually made up of poor small farmers who cannot provide a good market for business operators. Health and water installations, for example, are very expensive and demand high cost of human resources which most of these communities cannot afford. Business operators therefore limit their investment in such rural areas and prefer to invest only in urban centres where there is a market.

In the face of “neglect” from both public and private sectors most elites usually take the initiative of providing their people with basic amenities. This is usually out of self-esteem and the vision they have for their clan and people. There is usually competition among the villages. The elites contribute to the realisation of major infrastructures in their areas as a source of pride to the

people from that area on one hand and to prepare for their retirement on the other. The wealthy elites see their donation to community development as means of redistributing their wealth to the poor. Even though these factors are generally responsible for the formation of VDAs, local realities dictate the priority project that are often initiated and carried out by the respective VDAs.

**Table 4.** Financial Contribution towards the Abebung Health project 1996.

<b>Category</b>	<b>Rates</b>
Senior Civil Servants	20000+
Giant Business Operators	20000+
Average Civil Servants	10000
Small traders	10000
Youths	5000
Housewives	2500
Un classified	2500

*Source: Fieldwork, 2000.*

While the categorisation noted in the case of the Abebung Health Centre (Table 4) is more rational as it takes cognisance of the earning ability of members, there are cases where flat-rate contributions are levied for men and women. Gender is the major factor considered and this is the phenomenon in the VDAs studied. This usually involves small or less costly projects or projects that are near completion. The Alara palace project mentioned previously is a good example of such projects where the fundraising committee proposed a flat rate of N20.00 and N10.00 for men and women respectively.

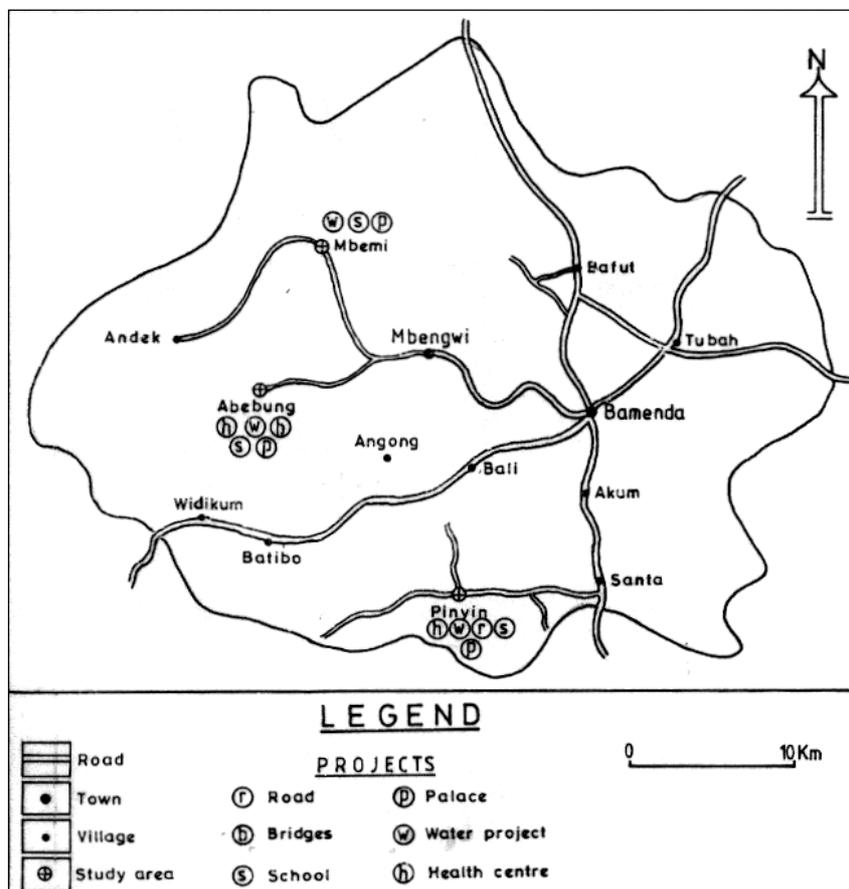
However, despite these defined annual rates, some elites volunteer large sums to accelerate the progress of the project. During a fundraising occasion for the same Health Project, an elite donated an additional sum of 150,000FCFA on the spot to accelerate its completion. It should be noted that the constitution of most VDAs usually makes a distinction between levies, pledges and donations. While levies are compulsory and amounts fixed by a committee, generous and spontaneous donations and pledges in cash and kind are non-compulsory; individual members decide on the amount or material gift, which in most cases reflects his/her status in the society.

Most of the pledges come from external or internal elites with political ambitions who use such occasions to canvass for support especially during campaigns against impending elections. This is even the case with those who want to run for leadership positions in their VDAs. Not all such pledges with political undertones are completely paid, especially when their goals are later not met. However, there are other pledges usually from those who want to encourage others to participate. This is the case of elites living abroad, businessmen and those already in leadership positions.

Another form of community participation is through the provision of services, manual work and material contribution. In the VDAs of Mbemi, Pinyin and Abebung, it was observed that the elites provide their services (as accountants, engineers, architects, etc.) to their various communities for free. This helps to account for the success and efficiency with which most projects are conceived, designed and run. In fact the elites are those who shuttle around the country using, in most cases, their personal funds or transport to coordinate, sensitise, and raise funds from members for the execution of projects. An elite is more and more regarded as someone with a sense of belonging to the community, and this is manifested in selfless contribution of material, and human and moral support for the improvement of the standard of living of the community. In this context, the elite factor is therefore crucial for the success of most community endeavours.

The material contribution of those resident at home or the project area is worth noting. These populations carry stones and sand, mould bricks, and dig trenches. They also transport materials to project sites. This is done on fixed dates set aside as “Community work days”. During these days the population turns out and works on one particular project. The traditional councils take care of recalcitrant members who refuse to participate might be sanctioned. This is one of the measures by which the traditional institution is crucial to the success of self-reliant development projects (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** The Study areas showing executed projects.



## 2.3 INVOLVEMENT OF WOMEN

Women play a very important role in the running and management of VDA projects. Be they women working in the public or private sector or housewives, they are involved both in the running of VDAs from the planning of projects to implementation though not fully in all cases. About 30% of the executive body of VDAs in the areas under study is made up of women (Table 5). These women are usually very influential in rallying fellow women to participate in community activities. From the research, it was noticed that women most often occupy the position of treasurers, secretaries and sometimes advisers. It was also noticeable that women are a muted category and often under-represented in the management structures of some VDAs. Most of them shy away or simply condone the status quo which is influenced by the respect for the deeply entrenched male traditions of the grassfields.

**Table 5.** Participation of Women in a Typical VDA in the Grassfields.

<b>Post</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Male</b>	<b>Female</b>
President	1	1	0
Vice President	2	1	1
Treasurer	1	0	1
Financial Secretary	1	0	1
General Secretary	2	2	0
Organising Secretary	6	3	3
Advisers	4	3	1
Total	17	10	7

The positions of treasurers or financial secretaries occupied by women are based on the general belief of the trustworthiness of women in dealing with financial issues compared to men.

Today, a new trend is gradually emerging within most VDAs in the Grassfields. There is the formation of women's development associations, which carry out women-led projects. These are usually low-cost projects, like the provision of furniture for schools and health centres, and the cleaning of public buildings. These activities usually do not undermine women's participation in the activities of general VDAs. Such activities have been seen to enlarge the total effort in the development process. Women are more effective in raising funds than their male counterparts. They often organise traditional dances, dishes, songs, and exhibitions with high success rates.

In rural areas, women mould bricks, transport sand and other materials to complement fundraising efforts. In fact, the gender division of roles in most

African societies is generally displayed here. For example, Anyanwu (1992) notes in the case of Alara palace project in neighbouring Nigeria that shares similar geographic and cultural features while men dug the sand and ground, the women handled the aspect of filling all the rooms with this sand. This is a concrete example of the complementary gender roles that existed in most of Sub-Saharan Africa before western imperialism.

It is worth noting that the VDA and women-led projects have contributed a lot to improving women's welfare and political status. These village associations serve as training grounds where women gain experience for future endeavours. Today, most of the women who are counsellors, mayors or influential members of political parties started with leadership roles in VDAs. In rural areas where opportunities for political leadership by women are few, projects like the Neke women's market project in Eastern Nigeria are able to bring women together to discuss basic problems, and show the tenacity of women to improve their welfare through self-help initiatives.

In Cameroon and elsewhere, women have shown marked preference for working in groups to solve economic difficulties, provide infrastructure and promote community solidarity. Niger-Thomas (1997) looked at a dimension of regionalism, which permitted local inhabitants to feel personally involved in economic and other development projects. Her example of the Manyu Self Reliance Food Stuff Cooperative Association is an indication of regional consciousness, which is premised on the philosophy of self-help. The group through cooperative efforts was able to increase the productivity of basic food products especially cassava, provide access to market facilities and promote of income generating activities of women.

### 3. CHALLENGES OF VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATIONS

As recorded elsewhere in Cameroon, such community endeavours are replete with a plethora of problems in sustaining such lofty self-reliant development projects. Unlike (Nkwi, 1997; Jua, 2002) who identify mismanagement, politicisation, vested interests, ascetic Protestantism and the drive towards accumulation in their examination of the pitfalls of the Njinikom Area Development Association (NADA). In the Mutengene case, though of a different geographical landscape, Njoh (2002) identifies barriers such as paternalistic posture of authorities, prescriptive role of the state, embellishment of success, selective participation, and intra/inter-group conflicts among others. This is an indication that self-reliance as a development model is increasingly under attack by the exigencies of a macro-political and economic environment. The shift from the ad hoc committee to the post-project maintenance committee in the Mutengene example shows the dynamic nature and process of community development. The merits of a structure that permits the citizens to play a central role in matters affecting their own well-being cannot be exaggerated. Such a

structure goes a good way in promoting community participation in a political system that is best known for its autocratic orientation (Njoh 2002).

The attempts by Village Development Associations to conquer the development space in various localities in the grassfields conjure elements of female marginalization. Women are grossly under-represented in most Village Development Associations and project committees. They are only useful at the initiation and mobilization phases, especially fundraising campaigns and contributions in cash and kind. When it comes to managing such projects, they are sidelined in most management and project decision-making structures. Though Jua (2002) notes that the structure of the NADA was modified with the creation of a woman's wing and women's social centre to provide training in domestic science (sewing, knitting, cooking and child care), health care and family planning for teenage mothers and unemployed young women, yet, women were sidelined in the holding of strategic posts. This concern is picked up by Njoh (2002) who intimates that one cannot help noticing the conspicuous absence of women and teenagers from the project committees that were responsible for making some of the most crucial decisions relating to the Mutengene Water Project. Yet, women and children undertake most, if not all activities requiring the domestic use of water in Less Developed Countries. There is the need to democratize the functioning of some VDAs so that women who constitute the cornerstone of community development in terms of planning and implementation can play a vital role. In Nkouondja community, women considered themselves alienated from the decision-making structure of the water management committee and they showed their disapproval by being adamant in paying their contributions. The issue was taken up serious in a public forum organised by the community with the assistance of HELVETAS and field staff of the International water and Sanitation centre, some women were incorporated into the village water management committee.

Elsewhere, the switch from one party state to a pluralistic society has had serious misgivings in the drive of Village Development Associations in community improvemental efforts. This is singly affecting the smooth functioning of some Village Development Associations as some prominent elite take recourse to party politics

Conflicts have arisen over the mismanagement of funds by some leaders of VDAs. This has led to the collapse of some Village Development Association's and a crisis of confidence for members of some committees. An old woman lamented in Nkouondja "my children you people should really help us out. These men are not serious. We contribute money but they do not write it down and afterwards they said we never contributed (IRC, 2002)." This scenario common in most VDAs is likened to the financial malfeasance that rocked the NADA and members of the executive were voted out of office.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper endeavoured to establish the place of self-reliance in Community Development. It is deducible from the concept of Community Development that the participation of the people themselves in efforts to improve their standard of living with much reliance on their own initiative and little or no incentives from the government is crucial in encouraging initiatives, self-help and mutual help. Diminished state intervention has rejuvenated the spirit of self-help, as communities tend to build on their local capabilities. This fosters a spirit of attachment, value, and respect to projects, which constitutes the goal, need, yearning and aspiration of the community.

The government and other development agencies can continue to reach out to rural communities by offering technical expertise and financial assistance. This can be done with the objective to develop self-reliance in the individual and common initiatives in the village communities towards the improvement of their standard of living. We have examined the critical factors responsible for the resurgence of VDAs in the Grassfields. The motivating and guiding principles have been: Reliance on indigenous knowledge, skills and technology, the support of elites who in most cases are outside the village, the collaboration between the traditional structure and other parallel community networks and the contribution of women and the fundamental role they play in community projects. The government in collaboration with NGOs should stress the importance of gender mainstreaming which involves the active participation of women in village development associations and other community structures.

The overriding principle has been for the communities to look inwards and search for solutions to urgent development problems through the mobilisation of local resources. If these institutions are strengthened by the state and made more democratic, they can play a greater role in planning for local and regional development. Government organisations and other development partners should devise strategies to support these local initiatives and regional networks, which will go a long way in transforming most rural communities.

Within the context of an expanding civil society, the contribution of the communities in efforts to alleviate poverty are crucial since they will determine the priority projects that touch on community livelihood. The assistance of international agencies with technical expertise and the necessary financial resources is necessary for existing community improvement endeavours. The institutionalisation of community development through the creation of a specialised department to handle operations of community development and provide the requisite expertise to communities will be a welcome contribution in a globalising world context. This will foster a spirit of partnership, hard work, and cooperation between the state and communities.

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