

**SMALL IS NOT ALWAYS BEAUTIFUL:
A CASE STUDY OF THE NJINIKOM AREA
DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION
NANTANG JUA
Cameroon**

ABSTRACT

Small, it is often claimed, is beautiful. This adage informs *basismo*, a strategy being used to promote the bottom-top development approach. The World Bank's bias for local development associations is premised on this same normative assumption. This case study of the Njinikom Development Association (NADA) examines the truth claims of this adage and seeks to make connections between the local, national and global developments, revealing only their dynamics but uncovering how these mediate the defining of selfhood among NADA members. NADA, it is argued, is also a space for violence (symbolic) engendered by the conflict of two rationalities and the penchant for politicizing even economic issues. Outcomes of struggles are skewed in favour of elites who are empowered with symbolic capital and money. Differential empowerment gives them an advantage that is used in promoting the birth of a new consciousness. Its effects are far reaching as they breach all accepted and acceptable protocol. Furthermore, it shows that elites are willing to invest in the development of the village only if it is a win-win game. Present development strategies seem to gloss over most of these considerations, thus impairing their effectiveness. Reversal of this trend with a view to promoting sustainable development in "village societies" such as Njinikom that are culturally different would require a conversation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Several initiatives adopted by international actors to arrest Africa from slipping into irrelevance in the 1990s lend credence to the thesis that this was its poverty agenda decade. These initiatives coming at the end of ideology (history) and promoted by the Washington consensus are grounded in a market fundamentalism (Soros 1998), relegating the state that had previously played a central role in development to providing an enabling environment. Management of this reform during the stabilization phase, though the domain of technocrats, has been extended as it moved into the liberalization phase and ultimately long-term consolidation. Consensus building among all the stakeholders is central in the latter phases of this process (Brinkerhoff and Kulibaba 1996: 125). To enable this, states as well as international financial institutions have engaged in the building of various associations, all with a view to guaranteeing that change is process-driven. However, some non-governmental associations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) that predate this effort have a different calculus. Claiming to privilege people, they were created at a historical juncture when the state was still searching for hegemony and could rightly be said to

belong to the trenches. This study examines the impact of one CBO, the Njinikom¹ Area development Association (NADA), assessing its capacity and effectiveness in enabling development.

NADA was founded in 1984. And the “white paper” creating it, stated succinctly: “unless a people takes its development into their own hands, nobody will do it for them”. Its relevance was reinforced by the failure of the Ahidjo government, despite its commitment to the doctrine of “balanced development” to allocate any resources to the area². Change in this policy, not noticeable in the early years (1982-1987) of the Biya regime, could not *a fortiori* be expected in a period when an economic meltdown accused the state from a *maximax problematique*, that is, its inability to meet minimum needs with maximum resources as from 1987. In this context, the state became just a discursive imaginary or a mere construct to the people of this area who were unable to experience it. This perception has not changed. Despite the upturn in the economy, as demonstrated by the growth in its macroeconomic indicators in the past three years (since 1999), their lives have not been touched. Focus on this area therefore proves that national studies reveal just as much as they conceal. It is the commitment to reverse this trend, that is, stop the area from slipping into irrelevance that pushed the elites to form NADA with a view to confronting the state and thereby seize the chance to obtain an invitation to the “eating table”. Accepting the right of the state to invite people to the eating was, to a large extent, symbolic of its implicit rejection of market fundamentalism.

This effort to promote the collective prominence of Njinikom was spearheaded by some of its elites. Though not conscious of it, they may have been stirring a revolution, not in the conventional but an existential revolution – this is the awakening in the human responsibility, spirit, and reasoning necessary for the recovery of a feeling of possibility. Development that had to be not just about increased capabilities but also informed choices could be engineered from within. Immediate and massive adherence to this group by the common man was not proof of its purchase. Rather, the rationale is provided by Julius Ihonvbere (1994) who argues that in context where the state is absent, “the masses turn to ethnic, religious and philanthropic organizations for hope, leadership self-expression and support”. Bondedness, inhering from a localization of space in this case, enhanced its seductiveness. Unlike its precursors the Kom Improvement Association (KIA) and the Kom Development Union (KDU)

¹ Njinikom is in the North-West Province of Cameroon. It seemed to have suffered from a punishing politics when the administrative headquarters of the then Boyo sub-Division was moved from there to Fundong. This is borne out by anecdotes foregrounding claims that some people had vowed to convert it into their hunting grounds. This is significant because the first school with a complete primary circle in Province was in Njinikom. Most of the first generation leadership, therefore, attended primary school here. According to Nkwi (1997), it has a population of more than 40,000 people distributed in 12 villages with over 7500 households.

² This is deduced from Nkwi’s (1997: 69) argument that the regime, in general, neglected the North-West Province.

considered as ecumenical because they included Belo, Njinikom and Fundong, the three valleys that comprise Kom, NADA focused only on Njinikom that has a predominantly Catholic population (de Vries 1998). A normative assumption underpinning it was: small is beautiful. Studying NADA would show whether this assumption was empirically correct. Furthermore, it is important because it assesses the linking of spatialities, that is the making of connections between local, national and global developments, revealing not only their dynamics but also uncovering how these mediate the defining of selfhood.

Early into colonialism, Njinikom was incorporated into the capitalist economy with the introduction of coffee farming. Its engagement with this economy/culture was also reinforced by the location of schools in the area. To endow it with all the accoutrements of a capitalist economy, a European missionary started the credit union movement there in 1963. But this did not guarantee the structural transformation of the area. Loans were not necessarily put into productive investments. Results of a 1971 study carried out in Ndu in the same ecological zone and inhabited by a people share cultural similarities with the Kom people showed that 27% of loan money was used for household purposes, 27% for education, 10% for construction and only 17% for business (Ahmad, cited in Courade 1988). The volatility in the commodity prices in the 1990s, I would conjecture, only helped to reinforce this pattern. Parents were under duress to educate their children at a juncture where subsidies granted schools were disappearing and cost recovery was being emphasized. Media refracted images of the West beamed into most households by television that was introduced in 1985 led to an increase in ostentatious consumption as people tried to emulate these patterns³. Thus, household expenditure was increasing, despite the fact that most families were facing a simple reproduction squeeze. Poverty seems to have become the norm. A report by the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA 1999) showing that 51% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa was living below the poverty line of one dollar a day reinforced this. Reversing this trend called for a scheme that provided employment and incomes.

To this end, several initiatives were broached in the 1990s. Prominent among them were the World Bank's Structural Adjustment and the International Monetary Fund's Stabilization. Though the new orthodoxy, it is revealing that they embraced poverty reduction reluctantly. NADA had thought that it could do this. But it counted on a partnership between it, the state and donors, as was the

³ Admittedly, the exposure of people to these images can lead to uniformisation as well as provoke a withdrawal in the self. (That is instead of being colonized by time, this latter group can be said to colonize time). This has been referred to as the dialectic of the satellite and the village pump, where people fascinated by what evokes a global dimension, react by clinging to the local. Since complete insulation, in my view, is however impossible, people in remote areas are still bound to suffer from a revolution of rising expectations. Failure a realization of their expectations, they easily suffer from a revolution of rising frustrations. Furthermore, it has been argued that locality –material, social and ideological- is always produced, maintained and nurtured deliberately. Production of locality, a project and not fact, takes place against the background of several contending forces. See Appadurai (1999: 231).

case in other countries⁴. The severing of this umbilical cord, that is, “connections”, caused it to review its agenda. Scaling it back caused it to focus on a quest to empower the poor economically and politically. The presence of elites among its membership in a system where they also occupy the interface between their groups and the state, and are even seen to reify the latter also explained its continued relevance. It is this multipositionality that enables them to defend “the interests of the local civil society while themselves being agents of the state” (Hibou 2000). Because of this Peter Akeh argues they straddle the civic public dominated by the state and its apparatus and the primordial public or groups that are disconnected from the state (Cited in Osaghae 1997: 18).

2. NURTURING A NEW ETHIC

Evidence from Latin America had shown that *basismo* (NGOs and CBOs) could serve as a motor for development. Its objective is not to provide a blueprint for an alternative political model but to “transmit modernization from below”, as a guarantee that societies answer the needs of the people. In other words, it seeks to give people paternity (voice) over their development. This requires an active participation in program/project design and implementation. The few projects carried out by the state and the KIA and KDU that were precursors of NADA had not abided by this precept. They used the top-bottom approach. This patronizing approach begins to explain their low rate of economic return, if not failure. Other factors also contributed. Though determining intentionality in the social sciences difficult, KIA is an instance where this can easily be uncovered. It sought (primarily) to assure the upward mobility by pressurizing the British to admit the Kom elite into local reciprocities, by giving them jobs and recognizing them as the legitimate representatives of their people. Sama Ndi, one of its leaders emphasized this in a petition to the British wherein he deplored the use of “unqualified messengers and interpreters instead of using men of intelligence and talent” (Nkwi 1997: 73). KDU, formed in the wake of the introduction of the hegemonic state in 1966 when people were supposed to consign their consciousness to the hegemonic party, the Cameroon National Union (CNU) could not readily map out a space for the symbolic affirmation of its leadership. Its effectiveness, even in the realm of policy advocacy, was impaired by the totalizing nature of the state. NADA was created in a different context. Biya, moved either by conviction or historical contingency granted local communities more autonomy over their development. Indicative of this was his choice of dispersed domination which requires the granting autonomy to other social forces within limited arenas rather than integrated domination as a early into his regime in 1982 (Jua 2000).

⁴ For a case study of three countries, Ghana, South Africa and Uganda, where this pattern is obtained, see Hearn (2001: 43-53).

To engineer a rupture with the past, NADA from its founding moment adopted a different ethos. Intrinsic to past practice was an assumption that rationality had a social location in the elite. The common man was seen as “standing reserve” that could be used only for instrumental value (Heidegger 1977). Its validity in Africa where two forms of consciousness, or rationality, one African and the other European, inform practice or co-exist is doubtful. Colonialism’s project which caused a rupture in space and incorporated African economic history into that of Western Europe simply devalued rather replace local modes of cognizance and perception. This explains the valorisation of this knowledge. Elites possess these two forms of consciousness and consequently can occupy the interface between their “pristine” societies and the state that is based on a different axial principle. This hybridism has an impact on their definition of self. Similar to the European, they use individual self-regarding frames. But as always already Africans, they still use communal self-regarding frames⁵. Despite this placement, it has been argued that nothing in Africa begins to suggest the possibility of the emergence of the degree of individual differentiation that is a defining factor in Western citizenship. The predominance of African over the Western gene explains this (Chabal and Daloz 1999). The implications of this argument, if correct, are enormous and impact on fundamental issues such as self-definition, elite culture and their attempt to (re)structure society. Culture “embodies those moral, ethical and aesthetical values, the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which (a people) come to view themselves and their place in the universe. Insofar as culture uses different parameters in judging rationality, one can look askance at the sustainability of any development effort or strategy that is predicated on another rationality. A consensus or convergence on the mode of knowing for defining and assessing development is therefore imperative in any development effort.

With a view to obtaining such a consensus, NADA opted for a bottom-top approach. Only this could provide it with the requisite social anchorage. Prominently, its organizational structure privileged popular participation in fund raising, project formulation and implementation. Villages and urban centres were organized into chapters and branches. This structure was slightly modified in 1986 with the creation of three wings, namely the Women, Youth and Student wings. Opting for a process-driven approach also caused it to choose annual conference, attended by representatives from all the chapters and branches as its supervisory body. This forum engages not only in fund-raising but allocation and evaluation of projects. Every three years, it elects an Executive Board of fifteen members that supervises the work of the Technical Committees and organizes the mini-congresses. Though elections into this Board use the first

⁵ Communal interests are supposed to be privileged even in death. This following the death of Francis Bebey and his decision to be cremated, one of his nephews criticized it thus: “I prefer to be one the side of custom such as I found it. Francis Bebey, my uncle, should have thought of the community to which he belongs; it was an egocentric choice”. Cited in *Le Messenger*, 15th June 2001, p. 6. (my translation).

past the post rule, care is always taken to make sure that all villages or groups of villages are represented on it. As a sign of its inclusiveness, it opened up even the powerless that are obsessed with symbols of power is important. But a safeguard to guaranteeing its effectiveness, only those who have the requisite cultural capital are allowed to present their candidacy for strategic posts such as those of President and Treasurer. The Committees include the Projects, Finance, Social and Sports and Education, Environmental and Socio-Cultural Committees (for details, see Nkwi 1997).

Statutorily, membership contributions were fixed at 6000 francs CFA for people living in urban areas, 500 francs and 250 francs for the village male and female adult respectively. Members are however encouraged to contribute as much as they can. Elites, seeing this as a means to social promotion and prestige contributed generously (Nkwi 1997). Evidence from Benin also bears this out. It has been argued that “ (t)hese areas of local solidarity will create the first leaders of the new civil society, that is emerging, and also the first ranks of legitimized intellectuals, who will in this way establish ... their political capital” (Nassirou Bako-Attolou, cited in Hibou 2000: 41). Contributions are collected by the chapters and branches and presented to the congress. The first congress in 1984, attended by hundreds of people living and working outside of the Njinikom area, raised more than US \$10,000. More than \$8,000 of this total came from people living in urban areas. NADA did not therefore suffer from a motivational deficit as Nkwi (1997) notes that KDU had never raised more than \$2,000 in any one seating in its more than sixteen years of existence. By 1997, NADA had raised more than 51,430,000 francs CFA (circa US \$205,720.00)⁶. Not surprisingly, a significant amount (\$146,000) was contributed by the external elites. Plausibly, the integrated domination of the CNU era was not a motivational factor. Elites, disconnected from the periphery, preferred to oil their networks in the centre. Social and political debts were owed to the centre and not the periphery. Because of this inversion, John Nformi Tatah, a Parliamentarian from this era claimed over a radio program, *Cameroon Calling* that he represented the President in his constituency! The home branches contributed about \$65,000. Donor organizations that saw NADA as a partner in development, following the shift in the development paradigm, provided it with more than \$60,000⁷.

⁶ Focus on just the amount contributed in the congress begins to overlook its role as a motor for the rural economy. Local businessmen readily admit their sales receipts witnessed a phenomenal increase in this period. Granted the tendency was to favour consumption along the lines of Bacchus. One bar owner readily admits that his sales witnessed more than a tenfold increase in this period. (interview with a bar owner, Njinikom, 23rd September 2000)

⁷ This amount pales in the front of the over US\$500,000 that was provided to Ghana's Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) between 1992 and 1997 by the US National Endowment for Democracy. Between 1995 and 1997, Denmark provided it with almost the same amount (Hearn 2001: 47). It can be conjectured that this is attributable to the fact that this organization was concerned with fostering procedural democracy which was high on the donors' agenda rather than social democracy as in the case of NADA. I make this argument conscious of Osaghae's contention that donors preferred aiding NGOs involved in the provision of primary health care, education and community development in Cameroon (Osaghae 1997: 16).

Similarly, the Ministry of Planning and Regional Development chipped in about \$10,000. Cumulatively, this did not add up to much and could therefore be considered only as social funds, that is, resources designed for small infrastructure community projects. Because of financial constraints, NADA had to scale back its objectives, disengaging from rural development which requires action in many areas, notably, the creation of policies and institutions that encourage private investments in rural enterprises and complementary businesses as well as the strengthening of the linkages between rural producers and small towns and urban areas where most of the processing and marketing occurs. Yet, it remained a major actor. Projects carried out with social funds could have a transformatory potential insofar as they contribute to what Simon Kuznets identified in 1973 as the ideological and institutional adjustment necessary for technological progress.

Over an eleven-year period, NADA carried out more than 27 projects. Significantly, these projects were designed and implemented by the villages under the supervision of the Board. Since capacity building, a prerequisite for the making of informed choices is high on NADA's agenda, it is not surprising that its projects have included the creation and running of a community primary school (now converted into a state run school), the building and maintenance of roads, the creation of a social centre for teenage mothers, the establishment of a scholarship scheme for secondary and university students, the promotion of environmental hygiene, provision of clean water to most villages and the support of health infrastructure (hospitals, health centre and orphanage). 70% of these projects were completed. Lack of funds and mismanagement caused the others not be completed (Nkwi 1997).

3. CAPITAL AND CAPACITY BUILDING

Development literature has shown that the economy of affection in which both town dwellers and villagers are tied together in webs of kinship and tribal obligation contributes inordinately to basic survival, social maintenance and development (Hyden 1983). Mbembe (2001: 46) sees this as centred on a "social tax" that the town dwellers pay to their people. Elite preoccupation with risk-avoidance against the vicissitudes of the market economy also caused them to send money back home. Some of the money was destined for productive investments and the income earned there from would enable people to meet their basic needs. Though correct, this explanation is incomplete as it overlooks the emotional considerations or paranormal concerns in which these decisions were grounded. In some cases, the need to insulate oneself from maleficent forces or witchcraft was the motivating factor. Contributions "cooled off" considerably in 1993, following a radical cut in salaries. The median salary dropped from about \$800 to \$200 a month. That some people just stopped contributing completely begins to problematise and nuances Mbembe's argument that elites are always already indebted to their society (Mbembe 2001).

In Yaounde, for instance, contributions dropped from over a million francs in the latter part of the 1980s to circa 100,000 francs in 2000! (**The Post**, May 7th 2001) Changes in the macro-economic context caused them to reassess their priorities. Privileging survival concerns rather than the accumulation of social capital caused them to renege on their financial obligations. In some instances, this triggered demobilization. Annual congresses lost their fiesta aura as the number of delegates in attendance plunged remarkably. Malfunctioning among branches became the norm and some even went into a comatose (see **The Post**, May 18th 2001). This drop in contributions, especially from elites' resident outside, had nefarious consequences for NADA.

Arguably, fixation on their personal survival in adverse economic situations caused its members to begin questioning the logic of the “economy of affection” with its emphasis on interdependence and reciprocal obligations. Not even the fear of social death caused by the failure to meet these obligations could serve as an adequate deterrent. Further proof of a change in ethos was their unwillingness to maintain an open door in their houses in towns. Previously, these served as halfway houses for their kith and kin from the village. A similar practice, it must be noted, had facilitated urbanization in late nineteenth century Europe. Here, traditional safety networks were beginning to disintegrate not having produced the same affect. Its implications were far reaching in two ways. Firstly, it increased the psychic distance between the people in town and those in the village, causing the latter to “other” the former. Distrust became a hallmark, if not the guiding principle in the relations. Its capacity to be self-fulfilling makes it difficult to ascertain the justification of these feelings. Suffice it to note that trust in any relationship, as Albert Hirschman notes, is a moral resource that increases rather than decreases through use and can be depleted if not used. Secondly, people lost paternity over NADA as it became hostage to a few development brokers who continued paying their contributions. Exit or disengagement became commonplace. Allowing politicization to occupy centre stage, these brokers turned the philosophy on which the Association had been based on its head. Ironically, this had a reverse effect as it pushed people to struggle retake its conscience. Its history at stage was not just history *per se*, but to paraphrase Claude Levi Strauss, history for.

The villagers' desire to retake its control rekindled their urge to start contributing their dues again, albeit the ‘asymmetrical shock’ induced by the volatility in the prices of raw materials in the world market and the indexation of their revenues to these prices. Funds from their family members in towns that could have made up for this shortfall also dried up. Fulfilment of their obligations under this extenuating circumstance was proof that the African peasant is unlike his Chinese counterpart who R. H. Tawney has described as a man “permanently up to his neck in water, so that even a ripple is sufficient to drown him”. Admittedly, their willingness may have been attributable to the feelings of empowerment that contributions engendered in them. Democratization of the Association had enabled some of them to come out of anonymity and the determination to retain this newfound visibility became a

mobilizational resource. Furthermore, they had paternity over the projects, not in the sense that they were involved in the designing phase *strictu sensu*, but because of the political accountability of the Board. But endowing them with powers to vote out its members caused the villagers to believe that the buck stopped in front of them. Whatever powers the Board had inherited from its perception in Kom cultural narratives as constituting “the eyes and the ears of the community”⁸. The people who retained the power of oversight could continue to vest the members of the Board with social capital only if they were seen as transparent and effective. Though this is important in a process-driven association, it must be noted that NADA could not thrive on only social capital at this historical moment. Trust as a moral resource can be a “real” factor in a period of growth. But it is not sufficient in times of national economic crisis where liquidity issues and structural transformation concerns take on centre stage⁹.

In the planning phase of NADA, we¹⁰ had hoped that coffee farmers would become a cornerstone in the Association’s development paradigm. Plans were made to request for support from (international) organizations such as the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) and Cameroon’s Institute for Agricultural Research (IRA) to help the farmers analyze the difficulties that confronted them locally. Though the Kom Area Co-operative Union, which is a member of the North-West Co-operative Association was already in existence, we believed that its capacity could be strengthened so as increase its influence in formulating policy and evaluating coffee farming. The stranglehold that the National Produce Marketing Board (NPMB) had in these realms had emasculated, causing enormous prejudice to its members. Strengthening its capacity (in policymaking) could reverse this as Mc Keon (1998) sees a positive correlation between marked improvements in organizational capacity and the support of international organizations and the capacity/enthusiasm of farmers to lobby government decision makers. But this plan was scuttled when farmers, in reaction to the low producer prices paid them by the government, decided to cut down their coffee plants. Insofar as this was a rational decision based on an effort/compensation (price) calculus, it proved that the social location of rationality could not be said to be among the elites only.

Bereft of their only source of finance, men were reluctant to engage in food crop farming that was considered as women’s work¹¹. Lack of liquidity

⁸ Because of this, a high premium is put on education. This begins to explain the high percentage of loan money set aside for educational purposes. See Courade (1988: 68).

⁹ For a case study on the importance of financial and capacity constraints see Nel (1997).

¹⁰ The idea of NADA was nurtured by Professor Paul Nkwi, Stanislaus Ngoh Nkwain (a UN civil servant), Sylvester Gwellem (a journalist), Sama Nkwain (a senior university lecturer), Leo Anguo (a senior staff nurse), Christopher Bung (a police commissioner) and Nantang Jua.

¹¹ Elsewhere in Africa, the readiness of men to engage in work reserved for women has caused a lot of controversy. This is true of some ethnic groups in the case of the Congo where men who dare into this domain are banished. See **Daily Times**, “Africa” July 16th 1997.

challenged the principle of burden sharing on which NADA was predicated. But above all, it had far reaching repercussions on gender relations which, though asymmetrical and hierarchical in the sense that they favour men at the expense of women, could not be considered in the present changing social context as expressions of universal, ahistorical natural laws. All are involved in a struggle against the complex networks in which they are enmeshed, and this means that their specific positions of superiority and subordination are neither neutral nor unchanging (Moore 1988). It is the fluidity in this relationship that threatened to cause men who had fallen out from the monetary economy to be relegated to the bottom of society's symbolic ladder. Materially, this was going to exacerbate the levels of poverty in the community. Fear that these could engender and consolidate feelings of frustration in men caused the Association to emphasize the importance of contribution in kind in the execution of NADA projects. Valorisation of this form of contribution, estimated at more than a million US dollars in the 27 projects executed (NADA Review 1996, cited in Nkwi 1997), helped to provide men with ontological security. Consequently, they used it to (re-) negotiate their position in society.

This non-financial contribution has been a boon as well as a bane to NADA projects. Since labour is strictly speaking voluntary, free riding has been a serious problem. While not threatening the life of projects, it shows a decline even in rural areas of the ethical value necessary for the existence of a community. It has not gone beyond a threshold where it would have negative consequences on project execution simply because considerations linked with the preservation of one's manliness coupled with fear of being put on moral probation. Since the home had become an arena of gender conflicts and struggles, men were persuaded that women, their protagonists, could hold up project failure as evidence of their uselessness and powerlessness in the community. Seen from this vantage point, participation in project execution helped to boost their self-confidence and allowed them to exist in public space, while also increasing their value. Besides helping to improve project quality and sustainability, this also guaranteed their participation in other development projects in the future. However, this judgement needs to be ambiguated, especially when generational change is introduced as a variable. The younger people who have a different notion of the social contract between the individual and community do not feel similarly constrained as they subscribe to the neo-liberal solution of everyone for his or herself. They attribute this to their exposure to Western culture – at school or on the television – that puts a high premium on individuation¹². As consequence of the globalization of the village, it challenges the hegemony of extant socio-cultural practices.

Revalorization of men because of their participation in project execution was also attributed to the fact that some of these projects fought against the

¹² Individuation deals with the desire as well as the capacity of individuals to seek life ways other than those imposed on them by the prevailing structure of social interests (Heilbroner 1988: 21). This trend, he observed was more common among school graduates.

“feminization” of poverty. Road construction is a case in point. Women need these farm-to-market roads for the evacuation of their produce. Lack of roads had caused (wo)manpower to be used for the evacuation of their produce. Not only did this take a lot of time but also a heavy toll on their health and that of the girl child. Disenclavement caused by road construction has changed this pattern. It is now commonplace to see pickup trucks carrying produce from farms to various homes or the market. Though the government has always paid lip service the construction of farm-to-market roads, I doubt that, being under a Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), it could invest considerable amounts of money in intra-village roads when inter-village roads were being allowed to fall into disrepair.

In some cases, occupation of free space by NADA was construed as a challenge by the government. Its reaction to NADA’s decision in 1994 to pay for the reopening of water points that had been closed three years earlier was a case in point. Instead of celebrating this move as an example of community participation that was intrinsic to the cost recovery philosophy of the World Bank, frontline officials were piqued by it. Francis Nkwain, as a Minister from Njinikom, saw this as a challenge to his *amour propre*. The decision closing these water points was taken during Nkwain’s tenure as Minister of Natural Resources, Mines and Water! Whatever the rationale, it could not be explained in local cognitive frames. Their son as Minister of Water was supposed to make sure that this utility was not in short supply in the area. Allusion was often made to Kembong, the village of his predecessor in the Ministry of Mines where water flowed from water points round the clock and bright lights lit the village in the middle of the forest. This was a story of an unbound Prometheus that Nkwain could not also deliver to Njinikom. After all, a goat has to tether where it is tied. Given this perception, they could only disbelieve Nkwain’s story the era of free services from the Providential state was past. And disbelief, which arguably spreads like a contagion, it has been noted, “signals something that the powerful fear, and slight as it may appear, we should not underestimate its force. It is, in fact, the first sign of the withdrawal of consent by the governed to the sanctioned authority of their governors, the first challenge to legitimacy.” (Janeway 1980: 61-62). Concern with reversing this image, may have caused the government to provide the area with 6,000,000 francs CFA for the reopening of all water points (Nkwi 1997).

4. INFORMED CHOICES IN A CHANGING POLITICAL CONTEXT

NADA’s early leadership, as indicated above, saw poverty from a multidimensional perspective. Prominent among the parameters that it considered were informational and political poverty. Informed by the Asian experience where the relationship between education, productivity and income appears to confirm the “human capital” theory, it put a high premium on

education¹³. Access to information was not just a matter of pedagogy, of learning or of education. It is a question of power. Those with it have both market and political power, a point that has been sufficiently developed by Michel Foucault in his knowledge/power tandem and the World Bank's Task Force on Higher Education which sees knowledge rather than physical capital as the source of present and future wealth in today's knowledge-intensive economy (TFHES 2000: 3). Locally, the success of members of Anglophone's first generation leadership such as late John Ngu Foncha, the first Vice President of Cameroon, late Bernard Fonlon, a University Professor and Minister, Archbishop Paul Verdzevkov of Bamenda and Christain Cardinal Tumi who had attended school in Njinikom attested to this linkage.

Education for empowerment, a prerequisite for the structural transformation of the area, was therefore incorporated into NADA's baseline agenda. Specifically, it was going to help create new transitional pathways for the youth, that are potential out-migrants and so help in fight against poverty, by endowing them with some skills needed to increase their market value or capacity for individual self-determination. In other words, it was a minimum requirement for their integration in the knowledge-intensive economy. Integration would not only enable them to satisfy their needs defined in a psychologistic (needs defined by human nature) or culturalist form (needs defined by the society) but also allow them a surplus. Surplus, as development literature shows, has enabled remittances that have been used to reduce poverty levels, if not transform the economies. Mali is a case in point. NADA members who were resident in towns also lent credence to this thesis. As indicated above, they contributed a substantive amount of its revenue.

Fear loomed (large) that this new group of out-migrants could completely disconnect from the locality, and thereby deprive the community of the multiplier effect. This explains NADA's decision to also focus on popular education with a view to bringing about a cultural renaissance. To this end, it organized annual cultural festivals during which different villages competed in portraying the culture and also funded language training programs. Textbooks (primers) for the teaching of Kom in primary schools were produced. In essence, these efforts were meant to help reproduce (Kom) culture, that is, "the set of spiritual eyeglasses, through which a people come to see themselves and their place in the universe" and cause the youth to take pride in it. Eventually, it was to serve as social cement even among out-migrants and provide them with grounding for self-definition. Developments in national politics have fortuitously contributed to furthering this goal. With the incorporation of terms such as autochtony and allogeny (*allogenes*) into Cameroon's political grammar

¹³ This link has been rehashed by Professor Stiglitz, Chief Economist of the World Bank, in his contribution on information economics. Contrary to the claims of classical economists that information has a zero or negligible cost and that every actor in the market could have an equal access to this information, Stiglitz has shown that it has a cost, the so-called transaction costs, that sometimes makes the difference between success and failure (cited in Ricupero 2000). The transaction costs are lower for those with an education.

as well as their usage in “othering” *allogenes*, there has been a marked resurgence in efforts among the latter to remain connected to their roots. This is borne out postings on the AFOAKOM site that emphasize not only the need to develop Kom but the readiness of Kom, even in the diaspora to contribute to it¹⁴.

With a view to overcoming this information deficit, NADA as indicated above, participated in the creation and running of a community school, funded both primary and secondary schools and started a scholarship fund. Crucial in its decision-making was the consideration that, reminiscent of Latin American, it could be said that “poverty was young and female” in this locale. Between 1984 and 1990, it awarded over 60 scholarships. The enthusiasm generated by this scheme caused more than 500 students to compete for them. From the point of view of immediacy, this helped to reduce land pressure as it took the beneficiaries off the land. It also served as an incentive for parents to continue contributing to NADA, hoping that their progeny may also benefit from the fund. In this way, NADA was similar to the historic welfare associations that played an inordinate role in educating people in the colonial state. Admittedly, it could not be as effective as these associations in a context where the transition from education to employment was no longer automatic (Rosenbaum *et al.* 1990). Since only the use of informal networks can guarantee job placement, prominent members in NADA were urged to make use of their connections to secure jobs for these young graduates. Altruism alone does not begin to explain their readiness to help. They were also conscious of the symbolic capital, a capital that is convertible and has been converted into political capital, that this would earn them back at home. Help was therefore tantamount to a rain check that could be cashed at any moment considered appropriate. NADA’s efforts would have had a far reaching impact if it created alternative income generating activities (IGA) in the area, a condition that would have maximized the positive externalities for the youth and the community.

Similarly and with a view to reducing risk among the women and their isolation¹⁵, a Women’s Social Centre was created to provide training in domestic science (sewing, knitting, cooking and child care), health care and family planning for teenage mothers and unemployed young women. This was significant because the 1997 *Human Development Report* identified the real life attributes of illiteracy, malnutrition among children, early death, poor health care and poor access to safe water as indicators of deprivation. Combating this would help to guarantee the health of the woman who is seen as metonymic of society. Her health was always precarious because the gendered division of labour assigned her responsibility for the production of food crops. It also enabled families to reduce the resources set aside health care. Poor health

¹⁴ As a case in point see, debates posted on 23 and 24 March 2002 on the AFOAKOM@yahoo.com site on the need of Kom residents in the US to contribute to the development of the area.

¹⁵ Isolation in this context means not lack of contact, not just in a physical sense, through living in a remote area, but also in a social sense, through ostracism and illiteracy (Chambers 1983).

enables poverty. In 1997, there were over 45 teenager mothers and early dropouts registered at the Centre.

Annual congresses, besides serving fund-raising purposes were also used as fora for education for empowerment. The goal was to foster a transformatory consciousness. Equity in access to education within and between generations or its democratization could only be assured by the presentation of public lectures during these annual congresses. Focus has been on condemning practices such as the increasing recourse to traditional medicine that spiralled following the “informalisation” of the country’s health sector. Similarly, practices that favour the exchange of gifts and sign value, to the extent that they are detrimental to use and exchange values have been condemned. Admittedly, gifts allow for a circulation of wealth, a form of levelling, in the society and are functional in the maintenance of its social equilibrium. But gifts and “the joyful destruction of accumulated wealth” as witnessed during occasions, such as death ceremonies¹⁶, that were meant to signify status have reduced the capacity of households to fight poverty, if not reproduce themselves. For instance, it was not uncommon for a family to exhaust all the maize in its granary during death ceremonies which lasted for about three days on the average. Similarly, cases abound of children that have not been return to school because the meagre, not to say precarious, savings of the family were spent on such “orgies” (Monga 1993). Positive practices such as generous contributions during these occasions, not on the basis of “to each according to his needs” but “from each according to his means” were encouraged. Changes in life views are proof of the effectiveness of this education. Despite the resistance, the sign value of goods is being devalued in favour of market and use value. For instance, the period set aside for death ceremonies has now been reduced to one day! Resources freed up by this change can be used for productive ends such as the purchase of agricultural inputs for crop production whose prices have spiralled following the removal of government subsidies at the insistence of the World Bank.

Generally and from a communal vantage point, emphasis on education was also meant to empower the villagers, thereby increasing their capacity to engage the state in a social dialogue centred on poverty reduction. Despite the apparent agreement over this goal, tactical and strategic differences threatened its realization as demonstrated in the case of the Community School in Upper Wombong.

¹⁶ Colonel Samuel Teyang’s decision to have his body cremated, coming closely in the wake of that of Francis Bebey helped to put this issue on the national agenda. Colonel Teyang just before his death had been involved in orgies in his village meant to bring about a closure to the lives of some of his departed family members. Consequently, when he died in Paris, villagers who expected another orgy inundated his home. On hearing that he was going to be cremated they all left because this was a blasphemous practice, new and unacceptable, according to Potawe Jean Jules, a noble in the Bandja kingdom, (cited in **Le Messager**, 15th June 2001, p. 6). The subtext was that it was unacceptable because it did not foster destructive consumption.

After several appeals from the people of this village, the government created a primary school there. But it remained virtual, not endowed with any infrastructure. This was not anomalous at this juncture when the need to comply with the conditionalities of the SAP caused the state to shy away from any investment. It was against this backdrop that the people decided to create a community school. Bereft of funds, they sought the aid of NADA as well as the Catholic Church. The church chipped in generously, enabling the community to buy more land for the school. After this acquisition, the community asked Plan International that had been involved in similar projects in other villages in Kom for financial help. This request received a favourable review. However, some development brokers saw Plan's implication in the project as negative. Besides enhancing its popularity credit, it threatened to challenge their privileged position – the interface that they occupied between the state, other funding bodies and society. Already as in the case of the water project above, their failure to make the state build the government school was seen as a sign of their impotence and a cause for a decline in their social capital. Fear that whatever trust people still had in them may be depleted caused some like Nkwain, now a former Minister and the campaign manager of the Cameroon People's Democratic Convention (CPDM) in the North-West to seek to deter Plan from funding the construction of the school on the pretext that it was a government school. This was an instance of the practice of *la politique du pire*. What I cannot do, you would not do. In the face of this injunction, a subliminal political message from an official who was seen as reifying the state, Plan desisted so as not to ruffle any feathers.

This pathological obsession with the provenance of funding for projects cannot be explained without taking into cognizance the changed macro-political environment. When NADA was created in 1984, Cameroon had just one party (CPDM) and practiced a pro-forma democracy where people were told how to vote in elections. Contracting the space for political action helped the state in its search for hegemony, a goal that was furthered by the use of the top-bottom approach even in the development projects. This changed with the advent of liberal democracy in 1990 and the pluralisation of political space. Political placements in national politics were reproduced in NADA. Tactical and strategic differences in the Association henceforth cohered, and strangely some would argue, with political ones. This disproved the initial belief of the founders that NADA could remain a strong apolitical group. This naïve thinking permeates international organizations such as the World Bank as instanced by its romanticisation of the role of civil society in its development discourse.

The reconfiguration of NADA membership along a fragmented political spectrum affected its capacity to engage the state in a social dialogue on development. 80% of the NADA, basically farmers, were the first to misidentify with the government/party. Exasperated by the fact that their forced savings with the National Produce Marketing Board (NPMB), accruing from a policy that kept producer prices lower than the prices in the world market (FOB) for several decades, had been mismanaged by the state, they moved into the Opposition.

Most of them joined the Social Democratic Front (SDF). As a form of politics of revenge, it showed the power of powerlessness. The impact of this political shift in a pluralistic political environment was demonstrated in 1993 when they voted out most of the CPDM members from NADA's executive. Remarkably, not even Nkwain who was still a Minister and had contributed 500,000 francs CFA or circa one-fifth of the total budget for that year (Nkwi 1997) was voted into office! Their mistrust for the CPDM members was heightened by the failure of incumbent treasurer since 1984, who was also a CPDM member, to give a full financial account. Financial malfeasance though carried out with impunity at the national level could not be allowed to penetrate into NADA.

As a political statement, it did not escape the attention of the Minister Nkwain who in a letter to Prof. Paul Nkwi, then the President of NADA wondered why all CPDM members of the executive were voted out. Nkwi in his response attributed this to their gross mismanagement of funds "and their allegiance to a government that was notorious for corruption, fraud and violation of human rights". He underlined the fact that "the development-oriented objectives of the association would be pursued irrespective of party affiliation" (cited in Nkwi 1997). Nkwi may have been right but he failed to realize that this politicization was going to de-energize NADA. Parenthetically, because of the prevailing philosophy in official circles where it was argued *politics na njangu* (politics is a game of give and take or a *quid pro quo*), NADA henceforth had to achieve this objective without the help of the state. It is against this backdrop that Nkwain tried to sabotage the Association in 1994 when he spent more than a week before its annual meeting convincing villagers, especially those who shared his political stripes, not to attend the meeting. Because of this campaign, 1994 can be seen as a watershed in NADA's history. The decentring of the developmental goals of the Association and its politicization caused it to become a new ground for political struggle among the elites and political parties. To a large extent, this begins to explain the implosion of NADA.

5. SOME CRITICAL COMMENTS

NADA was a concrete instantiation of the linkage between members of civic civil society and those of primordial civil society with a view to promoting development. KIA and KDU had failed to affect this linkage. NADA, which was predicated on a normative assumption that it would be more effective if limited to the level of the village, Njinikom, benefited from this experience. Small was seen to be beautiful. The initial optimism caused its sponsors to fail to examine the probable impact of changes in the macro economic and political environment on it. This was its bane. Falling contributions triggered by decreasing incomes, especially among the elites, have mitigated the capacity of the Association to realize this goal with the passage of time.

It is therefore paradigmatic of the fact that the linear vision of progress is not true even here. Attributing falling contributions to an erosion in the revenue base

of this class, provoked by various structural adjustment programs, a spiralling inflation and the devaluation of the franc though correct, would be incomplete. Also relevant is the preoccupation with devising alternative survival strategies in order to cope with the changed macroeconomic situation of the country. This has caused them to begin to review their priorities. And intrinsic to this process has been a review of the definition of self. Privileging individual over communal defining frames in this definition has caused them to adopt a new ethos that is shaped more by considerations of ascetic Protestantism. The implications for an economy that previously valued interdependence and reciprocal exchange are immediately apparent. For example, people in towns have reviewed the open door policy that caused them to be their brother's keeper. Today, they question or devalue the normative values of kinship, especially in instances where these ties do not connote a blood relationship. In other words, this can be seen as evidence of the simultaneous existence of *Gemeinschaft* (community), defined as a naturally developed association which has intrinsic values, and *Gesellschaft* (society) whose foundations lie in rational logic (Tonnie, cited in Gusfield 1975). This simultaneity questions Goran Hyden's (1987:7) thesis of stability as a trademark of the "economy of affection" in communities. Deprived of this "insurance" that had enabled people to effect a smooth transition between village and town, out migration has lost some of its appeal. And insofar as the village can be seen as the geographical location, even if not *par excellence* of poverty, this decline in out-migration would contribute to its exacerbation. Seen through another register, it deters, delays or disables the rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. This requires an initiation involving a liminal phase, usually experienced in a sacred forest in pre-colonial Africa. As a result of colonialism's transformatory consciousness, this forest was replaced by migration to towns or "*ville cruelle*" as depicted by Mongo Beti (Cited in Gondola 1999: 45)

Failure to make this transition retards the maturity of the children in whom their parents have invested as a social insurance. And it renders the diversification of portfolios of income generating activities that has as a coping mechanism in an environment of uncertainty (Berner 2000: 283) difficult though not impossible.

Despite this adoption of new frames in defining self, NADA members seem to have guilt written all over their faces as they indict themselves for bringing about a rupture in communal social ties. Because of this guilt, ascetic Protestantism has displaced rather than replaced the ethic that celebrates kinship ties. This begins to explain the apparent paradox in NADA where, despite the contribution fatigue prompted by the lack of a consensual culture, people are still looking for new ways to continue supporting projects that would help to curb poverty. Concern with the payment of this social tax is also prompted by their desire to accumulate more social capital that can be converted into political capital.

With a view to realizing these twin objectives, the NADA branch in Yaounde that has played a vanguard role in the Association not only proposed

what it dubbed the new “Social Project” but made its acceptance a conditionality for its contribution to the Association at its millennium congress (**The Post**, May 7th 2001, p. 5). Seeking to facilitate access to rural finance that has been a bottleneck in sustainable development¹⁷, it proposed the creation of a micro-credit (finance) institution that would be funded by equity shares bought by members of the Association. Interests from the bank’s loans would be shared to NADA and the shareholders on a basis of parity. Though development remained the text, the subtext had changed dramatically. It emphasized self-interest *per se* rather than its “enlightened” version, which in Weber’s view also caters to the interest of the other. This emphasis on instrumentalisation meant that development was only a collateral benefit. This idea caught on as can be deduced from overwhelming interest among its members to buy equity capital. Distilled to its essence, this proposal and the interest that it spawned was an indication that people would contribute to the development of the area only if it is a win-win game, a prospect that appealed to the new converts to the capitalist ethic. Coincidentally, this idea and its purchase are coeval with the birth and spread of the neo-liberalism that puts a heavy accent on private property in Cameroon. To increase its appeal, equity share was fixed at the 10,000 francs CFA and no one was allowed to buy more than 200 shares. Undoubtedly, this was also to allay fears that it was an elitist scheme to extort money from the community.

As proof of its appeal, enough call up capital bank’s take off of this bank has been collected. Dubbed the People’s Bank, it would be established as a “MC2” under the auspices of the Afriland First Bank. Besides the foregoing concern with accumulation, its appeal can be explained by several other factors. It enables an electronic transfer of money. This would reduce the transaction costs of transfers from foreign countries at a juncture where an increasing number of families depend on these for their survival. And because attacks or the threats thereof from *les coupeurs des routes*, people in Cameroon would also benefit from the “securisation” of transfers. Furthermore, experience from 19 towns in the West Province and five in the North-West Province where “MC2s” already operate shows that they have contributed to development in these areas by giving loans in five areas: business, housing improvement, school fees and agricultural and craft activities. The promise of liquidity for jump-starting development, even if this be just by deepening increased its seductiveness. There are inventions on the shelf that cannot be valorised for lack of funds. Some of these which were displayed in the Agro-pastoral show in Njinikom recently include locally-made compressors for extracting palm oil and other

¹⁷ The increasing need for capital begins to show the extent to which poverty must be seen in a dynamic rather than static context. As noted above, even villagers are exposed to television refracted images of the West. They are not therefore insulated from the forces of globalization. This exposure leads to a revolution of rising expectations. And failure to meet these needs, if attributable to a lack of finance, can lead to revolution of rising frustrations.

equipment for the manufacture of drugs and the bottling of drinks¹⁸. Above all, even if this be just a collateral benefit, it would enable NADA to access donor funding, presented in Cameroonian political grammar as “the last windfall ... for getting access to credit lines” (cited in Hibou 2000: 41). Pointedly, there is the Appropriate Development Fund for Africa, a Canadian NGO, carrying out rural development projects in areas where MC2s operate. Access to this funding may be a necessary condition for the creation of IGAs in this community.

As indicated above, the normative assumptions that provided the basis for NADA failed to take into cognizance the probable consequences of changes in the macro-political and economic environment. Its political neutrality, arguably, would enable it to engage in a social dialogue with any government. Seemingly naive, it must be observed that justification for this position was provided by the World Bank and reinforced by empirical evidence from Eastern Europe where civil society had played an inordinate role in bringing about the velvet revolutions. These engendered teleological expectations that the same process could be replicated (CODESRIA & UNDP 2000) in Njinikom. Empirical evidence did not bear this out. The community was fractured along political lines with some of its members retaining an organic link with the government. Connections such this, the literature has shown, enables the state to penetrate and probably capture civil society, thereby denying it the opportunity to serve as an autonomous actor in designing and implementing poverty reduction programs/ projects.

Relegating this tendency of civil society to fracture to a paradigmatic blindspot, the Bretton Woods institutions have presented it as a unitary actor and celebrated its capacity to combat poverty. This is due to fact that it is the product of a liberal revolution and “it is directed at the appropriation of tools and categories from other social sciences to further the goals of neo-classical economics in building a capitalist science for the creation of wealth. Placed in the context of African countries that have since the 1980s been gripped by a crisis of accumulation, this science seeks to legitimize and impose solutions (based on faulty assumptions) on Africa” (CODESRIA & UNDP 2000). That the reinforcement of the people’s capacity for self-organization, self-development and self-defense is central to the process of social transformation may begin to explain this obsession.

Foregrounding the role of capital in the social/structural transformation process is not meant to de-emphasize the importance of knowledge. In a knowledge-intensive economy, information would make the difference between prosperity and poverty. Knowledge, in this case, is the sedimentation of past experience. Past experience in Njinikom, however, has hampered development by promoting extravagance or the joyful destruction of precarious savings in “sumptuous consumption”. Change in this pattern is imperative. Chabal and Daloz (1999) in arguing that the African gene is stronger than the European one

¹⁸ See Tim Finnian, “Farmers exhibit fabricated equipment at the Njinikom Agro-pastoral show” AFOAKOM@yahoo.com, posted on 25th March 2002.

even in (African) hybrids, suggest that this is impossible. This argument is not borne out in the case of NADA where the elites have adopted a new ethic, ascetic Protestantism and are reluctant to contribute to projects that do not yield them any dividends. Education is meant to foster this mode of perception among the larger population. Resistance to change, no doubt, would come from some members of primordial civil society that see this as a threat to reproduction of a power system that has been beneficial to them. Essentially, this veiled attack on accepted and acceptable traditional protocols seeks to bring about a re-ordering of social relations that would re-render extant structures. The probability of its success is attributable to the “hiding hand” principle. According to Albert Hirschmann (1967), if individuals were conscious of the of all the difficulties (including even challenges to existing power relations, I would add), they would desist from engaging in the process.

Cognizant of the foregoing, there is undoubtedly a need for a new paradigm for poverty reduction in Africa. This would require a conversation that deals with the working out of novel possibilities rather than a discourse that supports inquiries into already existing possibilities (Shotter 1993). In other words, one has to challenge the thesis advocating the end of history. Unsettling as this may seem to the advocates of the neo-liberal revolution, avoiding false starts requires a realization that there are no “short roads to progress”.

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