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Cooperative Movements in the Western Highlands of Cameroon

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Introduction

- 1 A cooperative movement can be understood to be an action by which people with the same interest come together and create an enterprise where management rights are equal and the profits shared amongst them in proportion to their activities (Gentil, 1984). However, in a much broader sense, a cooperative is an enterprise where a group of people with the same interest combine all their efforts, their different expertise and resources in order to promote the well-being of all (IRNUDES, 1976). This means that in any cooperative society, self-help, community development and social well-being prevail over individualism and other egoistic tendencies. This article focuses on the constraints and adaptation strategies of cooperative movements in the Western Highlands of Cameroon. Thus, our research question is to know the specific dynamism of cooperative movements in the mountainous region of western Cameroon. Besides this main question, we also want to find out the main constraints faced by cooperative societies of the Western Highlands of Cameroon as well as the local strategies put in place to avert the constraints. Given all these questions, it should be noted that our main objective is to explain why cooperative movements have been most successful in the Western Highlands of Cameroon unlike other regions in the same country like the coastal, forest, and sahel regions.
- 2 To achieve this, we used as theoretical approach, the active participatory research methodology based largely on the exploratory type. This method allowed us to identify the main constraints faced by these cooperatives, to formulate hypotheses of possible preliminary actions and take stock of the local adaptation strategies that enabled the cooperative sector in the Western Highlands of Cameroon to stay in business. Our methods are based around documentary research, field work and field surveys in

particular through semi-structured interviews with members or actors of these cooperatives. This study develops around two main parts with the first being a geographical presentation of the mountainous region of western Cameroon and the evolution of cooperative movements in the region. In the second part, we analyze the major constraints faced by the cooperative sector while bringing out the adaptation strategies.

The geographical presentation of Western Highlands of Cameroon and the evolution of cooperative movements

Source: Authors' summary from the field

The Western Highlands of Cameroon: a region prone to the development of agricultural cooperative societies

- 3 Cameron situated on the Guinean coast of west Africa was a German protectorate in 1884 but in the course of the First World War, Britain and France occupied the territory and ultimately shared a league of nations mandate to rule the country. After the Second World War the territory became a United Nations trust territory under the same Britain and France in their respective areas of occupation (Ngoh, 1996). The French part got its independence in 1960 while the British part which was administered as part of Nigeria achieved its independence in 1961 through a plebiscite. With the plebiscite of 1961, Cameroon became a reunified country under a federal republic with two prime ministers and legislatures representing the two regions with a single president for the whole country. The former British administered section became

known as west Cameroon and the French section known as east Cameroon. Administratively today, Cameroon is divided into ten regions (formerly known as provinces)¹.

- 4 The country has four ecological zones; the western highland (North West and West regions), the southern rain forests (East, Center, South West and Littoral regions), the central savannah (Adamawa and southern part of the North region), and the northern arid region (northern part of the North region and the Far North region) (USAID, 1979).
- 5 The region considered as the Western Highlands of Cameroon in our study comprises the two administrative regions of West and North West (see map below) as they have the same social, economic and political characteristics. The climate of this region is the tropical humid type with two seasons which are the dry and rainy seasons. The dry season runs from end of November to March while the rainy season runs from the end of the month of March to the beginning of November. Average precipitation is in the range of 2000 to 3000mm with average temperatures of around 20°C. The relief of the area is mountainous with many plains and plateaus. The altitude ranges from 1000m-2500m asl. In these regions we find the Bamboutous Mountains 2700m and the Oku Mountain 3011m considered as the second highest mountain in Cameroon. The area is designated grassland because a greater proportion of the area is covered by grassland than forest (Forchingong and Fonjong, 2003). The soils of the Western Highlands of Cameroon are ferralitic, of volcanic origin and rather fertile although soil pH is on the low side. The population density is considered to be 128.5 inhabitants per km² with most of its population being rural dwellers who are fully involved in agricultural activities. Thanks to its fertile soils and climate which favors agricultural activities, there is the cultivation of various cash and food crops with most of the farms located on moderately sloping land with occasional ones on steeply sloping land.
- 6 The choice of our study area is justified by the fact that it is in this zone where cooperatives have survived the turbulence of liberalization meanwhile others in the same country have failed. Beyond the ideological visions of cooperative movements, the realities offered by our study area allows us to bring out the anthropological aspects on the values and experiences of its members. These realities allow us to better understand the processes by which most of these cooperatives were created and managed. The difficult terrain of this area requires its inhabitants to be hardworking and very favorable to the creation and deployment of agricultural cooperative societies based on the powerful idea that together a group of people can achieve goals that none of them could achieve alone. The traditional setting of the communities of the Western Highlands of Cameroon is highly centralized with well-structured hierarchical institutions. A purely African traditional society where the respect for hierarchy, tradition and culture is primordial. Our study area which is the largest producer of Arabica coffee in the country gave rise to various farmer cooperatives to address all possible challenges in the sector.

The evolution of the cooperative laws in Cameroon

- 7 Cooperative societies in Cameroon have witnessed a series of reforms since the 1970's with the first being law no.73-15 of 7th December 1973. This law gave the state powers of investigation and intervention, control and inspection of cooperatives as well as the appointment and revocation of its administrators especially directors. This law pointed

out state involvement in the activities of cooperatives. It is this law that gave way to the putting in place of the National Produce Marketing Board (NPMB) in 1975. This was a parastatal that worked with the cooperatives as it bought produce from these cooperatives and sought to market them as well as other things that strengthened cooperatives during the years 1975 to the early 1990's which saw the demise of the structure.

- 8 The second law regulating the activities of cooperatives was law no.92/006 of 14 august 1992 relating to cooperatives and Common Initiative Groups (CIGs). This law brought in liberalization in the sector as it allowed cooperatives and CIG's to carry out their financial as well as administrative activities independently without government intervention.
- 9 With the adoption of the new OHADA (the Organization for the Harmonization of Business Law in Africa) law of 15th May 2013 concerning cooperatives, called on CIG's to transform themselves into cooperatives. The OHADA law talks of two types of cooperatives: the simplified cooperative and the cooperative with a board of directors. The advantage for farmers is that the simplified cooperative is adapted for village groups as it can be made up of five members which will make its management easy. Meanwhile the cooperative with a board of directors demands for at least 15 members where its constitution is complicated as well as the management organs³. This means that any group of individuals based on their potentials can constitute themselves either of the two types of cooperative societies.

The evolution of cooperative societies in the Western Highlands of Cameroon

- 10 The history of cooperative movements in the Western Highlands of Cameroon is linked to the production of Arabica coffee. This region provides a veritable climate for its production according to René Coste who asserts that "Arabica, due to its climatic origins, does well in mountainous areas of tempered altitude with hot and humid climate that characterizes the coastal zones."⁴
- 11 The development of cooperative movements in Cameroon and the Western Highlands in particular began during the colonial period as the colonialists created and managed the first cooperatives (Portères,1948). This is the case with the cooperative of Bamoun Arabica coffee farmers (CPBCA) created in 1932 in Fouban and the Agricultural Cooperative of Bamileke Arabica Coffee Farmers (CAPBCA) created in 1933 in Dschang. It should be noted that the West region of Cameroon is dominated by these two ethnic groups (Bamoun and Bamileke). The Bamouns occupy one of the administrative division in the area while the Bamileke occupy the other seven divisions. The first cooperative societies in this region were created on ethnic affiliations. These two cooperatives that is CPBCA and CAPBCA merged to form Agricultural Cooperative of the West (COPAGRO)⁵ that was abandoned by the Europeans and handed over to the local farmers. This cooperative provided services in the areas of coffee production, pulping, collection and sales to local or non-local importers (Dongmo,1981). It should be noted that apart from the above cooperative societies that were created by the Europeans, Mathias Djoumessi who was a Cameroonian created the first indigenous cooperative in 1948 known as the cooperative for the production, collection and sales of coffee (COOPCOLV) in Dschang⁶.

- 12 In 1958 CAPBCA was balkanized to form different smaller cooperative societies in the different localities giving rise to the Bafoussam Arabica coffee farmers cooperative (CPCAB), Mbouda Arabica coffee farmers cooperative (CPCAM), Haut Nkam Arabica coffee farmers cooperative (CPCAHN) and the Nde Arabica coffee farmers cooperative (CPCAN). Later in the same year, all these cooperatives came together to form the Central Union of West region Agricultural Cooperatives (UCCAO) (Signié, 1999).⁷ The four cooperatives changed their names to reflect that of the administrative division with the cooperatives of Menoua and Noun joining to make up six secondary cooperative unions grouping other smaller cooperative found at the sub divisional and village levels known as the primary cooperatives.

Diagram showing the organizational chart of UCCAO

Source: Authors' summary from the field.

- 13 Due to the indirect rule policy of the British colonial administration in the North West region, there was some sort of liberty which gave birth to many local initiatives as ideas easily entered the region from Nigeria. The issue of cooperatives here began in the bigger towns where the people had acquired western education and sought to protect and develop agricultural developments in the region. The first cooperative society saw the light in 1920 known as the Bamenda Farmers cooperative union.⁸ The encouragement this cooperative got from the Nigerian Marketing Board led to the creation of other cooperative societies in the bigger towns of the region like Bamenda, Mbengwi, Kumbo, Fundong. This idea gave rise to the creation of the North West Cooperative Association (NWCA) in 1950. This association started educating farmers on the importance of the cooperative society urging them to be members. The NWCA was being supported by the Southern Cameroon Marketing Board (SCMB) which was created in 1954 to ease the marketing of agricultural produce and obtain foreign exchange.
- 14 This gave rise to 143 primary cooperative societies and 7 secondary cooperative unions with about 35000 farmers as members⁹. The primary cooperative societies also known as cooperative produce marketing societies (CPMS) have direct contact with the farmers as they are the ones who purchase the produce directly from the farmers and they are found at the villages and sub divisional levels. The secondary cooperative unions (SCU) acts at the intermediate stage. The produce which is collected at the primary level is processed here and made ready for delivery to the umbrella body

which is the NWCA. The NWCA then collects the processed produce, finds a market for them and gets the produce at the ports. Thus the NWCA is at the top of the organizational chart followed by the Secondary Cooperative Unions (SCU) while at the bottom is found the Cooperative Produce Marketing Societies (CPMS) as can be seen from the diagram below.

Diagram showing the organizational chart of the North West Cooperative Association

SCU= Secondary Cooperative Union. CPMS= Cooperative produce Marketing Society.

Source: Authors summary from the field.

- 15 The SCMB which facilitated the marketing of cash crops in British Southern Cameroons became the West Cameroon Marketing Board (WCMB) when it achieved independence in 1961 through the plebiscite. In 1965, the West Cameroon Marketing Board later changed to be called the Produce Marketing Organisation (PMO). With the demise of the federal system of government and reunification of the country through a referendum in 1972, the PMO was dissolved in 1975 and an umbrella parastatal to take charge for the development of agriculture in the whole country was created known as the National Produce Marketing Board (NPMB).¹⁰ This body came to the aid of cooperative societies as it provided education and training, provision of subsidized agricultural inputs to farmers, purchase and export of produce as well as the construction of farm-to-market roads to ease the transportation of produce. This board also created a stabilization fund to avoid the fluctuation of prices of produce at the world market from affecting farmers thus strengthening the force of cooperative societies. The next part of this work is to show the major constraints these cooperatives have faced and the strategies for adaptation.

Major constraints facing cooperative societies in the Western Highlands of Cameroon and adaptation strategies

Structural and managerial constraints and adaptation strategies adopted

- 16 The liberalization of the cooperative sector in the 1990's led the state to withdraw support services like audit, supervision and management. This negatively affected cooperative societies as corruption and misuse became widespread in many cooperatives leading to bankruptcy hence quitting the business.
- 17 The members of the cooperative societies of the Western Highlands of Cameroon realized that the running capital of the cooperative were members' contributions and they are the ones to decide how the cooperative has to be run. In all UCCAO primary cooperatives, members are elected to represent them at the divisional level who then become members of the general assembly of the secondary union.¹¹ The general assembly then elects the members of the board of directors and president of UCCAO. This body designs the policy of the cooperative union. The board of directors then appoints a general manager and his deputy who all handle the day-to-day running of the movement under the supervision of the board of directors who can discharge him when he proves incompetent. This situation is different from the period before liberalization where the minister of agriculture appointed managers of these cooperatives making them to pay allegiance to the one who appointed them rather than to serve the members and goals of the cooperative.
- 18 Moreover, the administrative machinery of these cooperative societies was cumbersome during the boom period which made it difficult for proper follow up of farmers and employees thereby having a negative effect on their performance. For example the case of UCCAO whereby one of its secondary cooperative unit CAPLAME had about 35000 members scattered everywhere in the Menoua division by the year 1990. It had 52 units and administrative organs like; the general assembly, board of directors, control committee, treasurer and unit heads. Today, CAPLAME has tried to reduce this complex administrative machinery with the removal of the position of deputy director and bring in some fluidity in the services of the directorate general.
- 19 This managerial transparency can also be seen in the way cooperative members are recruited. The 1992 law on cooperatives and common initiative groups stipulates that anybody adhering to a cooperative society must have a farmers booklet bearing his names, registration date, national identity card number, name of the cooperative he is adhering to, the amount of his shares and the stamp of the cooperative issuing the booklet (Ndouta, 1980). All these mechanisms are geared to better identify the various members and to avoid errors during payment which can discredit the cooperative. Through this, it is difficult for anyone to use fraudulent means to receive royalties (rebates for sales in a year)¹². These actions reflect the primary motives of cooperative societies as stipulated by Jean Soyinzoga (1985) who maintains that a cooperative "must be an association of people with limited income who have voluntarily come together to create a democratically run business whereby the members actively participate by

providing his share of the running capital and accepting a fair share of the risks and benefits of the undertaking.”

- 20 Moreover, the absence of the NPMB made farmers feel the effect of price fluctuation of cash crops in the world market meanwhile those of food crops have been increasing as can be seen from the graph below which Dongmo (1985) says it is flattering to agriculturalists.

Graph showing the increase of food crop prices as opposed to cash crop prices between 1984 and 2010

Source: Authors summary from the field.

- 21 This meant that cooperative societies needed to diversify their production from cash crops to food crops whose prices were increasing every day and did not depend on the world market. Most cooperatives limited their activities to cash crops like cocoa and coffee. Meanwhile in the present context where there is the threat of food crisis, cooperatives need to open up to the cultivation of other crops of high consumption. The UCCAO realized the importance of this diversification as she implemented it through CAPLAME which recently created a service in charge of poultry farming. As of now, this poultry is the largest in the region and has thousands of broilers of all races especially the “lohman Brown” specie. One can mention here that crop diversification by these cooperatives is one of the adaptation strategies implored. The NWCA on her part has also embarked on a vast rice production project in the Santa Area Cooperative Union, palm oil in the Momo Area Cooperative Union amongst other food crops, Irish potatoes in the Bui cooperative Union Area.¹³

Constraints and adaptation strategies at the economic level

- 22 The major economic constraint which cooperatives face is competition. In effect after the liberalization of the cocoa and coffee sector in the early 1990's, most of these cooperatives found it difficult to impose themselves in their communities as other actors like multinationals and Local Buying Agents (LBA) came into the business and carried out the same activities like the cooperatives and even better. Kuit (2008) confirms this: “since liberalization, the Cameroonian coffee is open to any buyer. Farmers do not seem to have apparent loyalties to NWCA and sell, logically, to whomever offers the best price.” The deficit that accrue from the withdrawal of state subventions to these cooperatives as justified by the global economic crisis of the 1980's (Fongang, 2008)

greatly affected cooperative societies in Cameroon in general as it led to the fall of the prices of cash crops as well as its production which was the principal source of income for these agricultural cooperatives (Abdou, 2011).

- 23 A strategy that has been put in place by the government and cooperative administrators is the gradual revival of the coffee and cocoa sector. This reflection aimed at moving from subsistence to professionalizing the sector to making it more durable and economically profitable to all involve in the cooperative chain¹⁴. For these objectives to be realized, the ministry of agriculture and rural development have taken some measures to accompany these cooperatives in providing them with ameliorated seedlings and other agricultural inputs like fertilizers.
- 24 The cooperatives in the Western Higlands of Cameroon unlike their counterparts in the other regions decided to reinforce their financial capacities by creating credit unions. In the North West region, every primary cooperative was force to invest more in the credit unions so as to overcome the lapses of the withdrawal of government subsidies. This scheme accepts even non-farmers as shareholder or member as it acts as a micro finance enterprise giving out loans at lower interest rates especially to farmers to ameliorate their production. With the dissolution of the NPMB, these services became absent coupled with the fact that banks refuse to give out loans to farmers as they lacked enough collateral securities hampered the latter's activities and those of cooperatives in general. Thus this scheme of creating credit unions has gone a long way to keep these cooperatives in business because they do not very much feel the weight of government disengagement.

Constraints and adaptation strategies on the social domain

- 25 With the end of strict state supervision, cooperatives were left without a regulatory mechanism to play the role that the government previously played. The newly acquired freedom was dangerously abused by elected leaders to the detriment of many cooperative societies. Cases of corruption, gross mismanagement by officials, theft of cooperative resources, failure to surrender members' deposits to cooperatives by employers amongst others were increasingly reported in many cooperatives.
- 26 These problems though were common among the cooperatives, the weight was not very heavy in the Western Higlands because these people are very hardworking and full of respect for things that have to do with the community. Their cultural background does not give them room for such behaviors as it is considered a taboo in these communities. The traditional setting of the communities of the Western Higlands of Cameroon is highly centralized and hierarchical with strong traditional institutions to oversee the actions of the people (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2003).The people live a communal lifestyle whereby the interest of the community supersedes individual interests and the belief of working as a group is favored. Moreover there is strong adhesion to tradition whereby certain vices are considered as taboos which are punishable by the gods of the land¹⁵. All these worked in favor of cooperative societies in the Western Higlands of Cameroon unlike those in other parts of the country like forest regions whereby there is total liberty and less powerful traditional institutions to put injunctions on certain malpractices in the community.
- 27 Added to the structural organization of the cooperatives to ensure efficient management, it should be added that the cooperatives of the Western Higlands of

Cameroon have many technical departments with specific roles. The NWCA for example has the marketing, finance, education and training as well as the internal audit and control departments. All geared to ward off mismanagement in the structure.

- 28 Another social constraint affecting cooperatives especially in the neo liberal era is the disconnection between the central cooperatives and the farmers. Most of the cooperatives lacked the means to meet up with their social responsibilities towards the farmers and this made the latter feel excluded from cooperative activities leading to decrease membership. The cooperatives in the Western Highlands of Cameroon have been able to overcome this social constraint by creating smaller cooperative units in every village so as to be close to the farmers. For example a secondary cooperative of UCCAO like CAPLAME has 54 of such units while the NWCA counts 143. With these cooperatives at the village level farmers are incited to remain loyal to these cooperatives especially as their innovations are better felt thereby attracting more members. Moreover, the cooperative societies in the Western Highlands of Cameroon unlike their counterparts in the country have done more in ameliorating the living conditions of its members and their communities in general through the building of water catchments points, construction and maintenance of feeder roads, providing didactic equipment to schools amongst others. These actions have attracted many farmers to join these cooperative because membership in cooperatives is in function of their alignment with people's interests and provision of services that are required by members.

Conclusion

- 29 From the above analysis, it can be seen that cooperative societies in the Western Highlands of Cameroon faces many challenges especially due to the liberalization of the sector but they have taken stringent measures to overcome these constraints. Unlike their counterparts in the same country who faced the same weight of liberalization, they still remain in business while others have declined from the sector. Thanks to its organizational structure as well as its socio-economic objectives, cooperative movements in the Western Highlands of Cameroon have contributed and continue to contribute to the growth of social capital, social integration, fight against poverty and unemployment thereby portraying its human face making it different from other businesses thereby attracting active and effective membership participation. For cooperatives to continue in this light and to do better, they will need to overcome efficiently the constraints they are faced with by bringing more innovative strategies to match up the changing times.

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NOTES

1. The ten regions of Cameroon are; adamawa, center ,east, far north, littoral, north, north west, south, south west and west.
2. The 2005 general housing and population census of Cameroon
3. Willy Tadjudje, expert in cooperatives law, researcher at Université de Luxembourg, in journal *La voix du paysan*, october 3rd, 2013.
4. ANY (Archives Nationales de Yaoundé), APA (Affaires Politiques et Administratives), 1AA 177, Activité de la coopérative des planteurs de café d'Arabie, p.2.
5. Journal officiel du 21 janvier 1949 portant réorganisation du contrôle des coopératives et des sociétés de prévoyance, p.7.
6. Ibid.

7. UCCAO is made up of six secondary cooperative units known as; agricultural cooperative for farmers of Menoua(CAPLAME), agricultural cooperative for farmers in the Haut Nkam(CAPLAHN), agricultural cooperative for farmers of Nde(CAPLANDE) agricultural cooperative for farmers of Mifi(CAPLAMI), agricultural cooperative for farmers of Noun(CAPLANOUN) agricultural cooperative for farmers of Bamboutos (CAPLABAM).
 8. Interview with Tande Musi Daara, 75years old, farmer, Mbengwi, June 2014.
 9. The seven secondary cooperative unions that form the NWCA are; Boyo Area Cooperative Union, Nso Area Cooperative Union, Bamenda Area Cooperative Union, Donga Mantung Area Cooperative Union, Oku area Cooperative Union, Momo Area Cooperative Union and the Santa Area Cooperative Union.
 10. Post watch magazine no.010
 11. Interview with M. Gninpieba Sa'aton Victor, former chair of the UCCAO board of directors, Dschang, February 2013.
 12. Léonard Nguéna, 40 years old, Accountant at UCCAO, Bafoussam, 28 avril 2012.
 13. Interview with Lawrence Shang, 60years, administrator at the Bui area Cooperative Union, august, 2014.
 14. Strategic document for the development of coffee, p.13.
 15. Interview, Mogwe Christopher Mbah, 63years, administrator NWCA, July 2014
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ABSTRACTS

Cooperative societies in the Western Highlands (West and North West regions) of Cameroon is an age old institution which started with the arrival of the European colonialists towards the end of the nineteenth century. The fertile soils of this region favors agricultural activities thereby giving rise to many cooperatives in the region. The cooperative societies that have been developed in these areas are the type found in sub Saharan Africa which has stood the test of time more than half a century whereby the other cooperatives elsewhere in the same country have failed. The question this article is about to provide answers is to what has made these cooperatives in the Western Highlands of Cameroon able to stand the test of time when others are quitting the scene. To come out with this scientific article we have implored the active participatory research methodology. The analysis shows that these cooperatives since their creation have been imploring certain innovative measures to make them adapt to the many constraints in their sector.

Les sociétés coopératives dans les hautes terres de l'Ouest-Cameroun (régions de l'Ouest et du Nord-Ouest) sont des structures anciennes qui ont vu le jour avec l'arrivée des colonisateurs européens vers la fin du XIX^e siècle. La fertilité du sol dans cette vaste région a favorisé la pratique des activités agricoles, donnant lieu à la naissance de plusieurs sociétés coopératives. Les sociétés coopératives qui se sont développées dans ces zones font partie des rares structures dans toute l'Afrique sub-saharienne qui ont jusqu'ici résisté aux turbulences et contingences multiformes, depuis un peu plus d'un demi-siècle aujourd'hui, ce qui n'est pas forcément le cas dans d'autres régions du pays. Il est question dans cet article de dire pourquoi ces sociétés coopératives des hautes terres de l'Ouest Cameroun ont pu résister au temps tandis que certaines dans d'autres régions ont plutôt quitté la scène. En nous basant sur une méthodologie de recherche active et participative, nous montrerons en quoi ces sociétés coopératives, depuis leur

création, ont réussi à implémenter certaines mesures innovantes leur permettant de faire face et surtout de s'adapter à plusieurs contraintes inhérentes à leurs différents secteurs d'activités.

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