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Citizen Strategizing Amid a Solidarity Economy in Cameroon

Are Village Development Associations (VDAs) Resilient?

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Draft paper prepared for the UNRISD Conference

Potential and Limits of Social and Solidarity Economy

6–8 May 2013, Geneva, Switzerland

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Citizen Strategizing Amid a Solidarity Economy in Cameroon: Are Village Development Associations (VDAs) Resilient?

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Abstract

Mobilising scarce indigenous resources for provisioning of essential services is problematic. Bereft of critical infrastructure, rekindled community cohesion and heightened cultural identity are deployed by VDAs to fill gaps. Social capital and ecological theory provide framework for an existentialist and essentialist approach. Drawing on empirical data, this paper unpacks solidarity, gender, and locality discourse, evidenced through Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association (NACDA). VDAs are deeply entrenched in slogans such as: 'our destiny is ours' 'unity is strength' with projects financed largely through citizen donations. Solidarity agenda is fired up through midterm meetings, annual cultural events, assemblage of citizens nationwide and Diaspora for stock taking and supplementary contributions towards earmarked projects.

Ethnicity binds communities against credence that development flows from concerted efforts, rather than reliance on lethargic state intervention. Rooted in cultural mindset is notion of giving back to your ancestry. Whilst this ethos proves beneficial, VDAs are grappling with a politicised environment, elite machinations, financial drawback, varying degrees of participation, patchy ground rules and underhand arrangements.

Makings of Solidarity Economy

As development discourse, solidarity movement came to spotlight at Social Forum in 2001, against populist forces yearning for alternatives, not state centric; grounded in moral, social and mutual perspectives. In a context of deepening poverty, declining state involvement in infrastructural development, community based organisations in North West region of Cameroon have been heralded as linchpin for local development initiatives (Fonchingong C. 2005, Fonchingong C. & Ngwa C. 2005). Conjectured as a new form of mobilising to counter excesses of capitalism and citizens' interpretation of the local, this study uncovers rationale of solidarity from prism of citizens organising from below. While there have been various co-operatives and organisations, working with similar principles before (Lechat 2009), Miller (2006) locates solidarity discourse: 'solidarity economics embraces a plural and cultural view of economy as a complex space of social relationship in which individuals, communities, and organizations generate livelihoods through many different means, with different motivations and aspirations - not just maximization of individual gain'. The complexity posed by state-society relations to realization of citizenship rights in poorer countries reflects unwillingness as well as incapacity of states to guarantee basic security of life and livelihoods for its citizens, proneness to capture by powerful elites. Identity, affiliations, and access to resources continue to be defined by one's place within a social order that is largely constituted by ascribed relationships of family, kinship, and community (Kabeer 2011).

Economic activity validated by neoclassical economists represents, in this view, 'only a tiny fraction of human efforts to meet needs and fulfil desires'(Miller 2006:

13). Solidarity economy is an alternative informed by ethical and social goals. Profits and market relationships are subordinate to these purposes; it is an end in itself (IDF 2011). Village development organizations are championing the course of community development due to lessening state intervention. Paramount to these organisations is shared trajectory - flagship for citizen association and ethnicity. This is bolstered by a strong sense of social justice, mutual help; ecological consciousness; and destiny.

Another argument deployed is growing elite influence linked to budding middle class. This is central to theorizing on solidarity as wealth sharing, political connections, governance and redistribution of resources to foster development amongst ancestry are hallmarks in unlocking potential of communities. Thinking through a post-2015 development agenda within UN system (UN 2012: a and b) suggest an agenda centred on four key dimensions: more holistic approach focusing on inclusive, social and economic development, environmental sustainability; peace and security (Birdsall 2010, Deacon 2012, AFDB, 2011:15); with elite buy-in to inclusive state welfare provision (Deacon 2012). A buoyant and cash solvent elite make a huge contribution through injection of funds, expertise, knowledge transfer and building a critical infrastructure. Whatever their motives, elites are potent voices, pressing for participatory governance. It is within logic of perceiving solidarity as a force for social good that this paper makes a contribution.

Citizen participation and social cohesion are crucial in communitarian ventures. Positioned as key players in grassroots development, VDAs are flag bearers in reclaiming development through greater mutual engagement that downplays profit and free markets - off-shoots of capitalism. Zacher (2013) captures essentialist function of solidarity: 'it concerns everything wherein individuals and communities develop themselves: environment, economy, civilization, and its culture, internal and external security'.

Solidarity is located within ambit of citizen engineered development with cultural identity and social capital as strong reference. This study confronts a central question: can village organizations anchored on members' collective efforts persist in delivering key projects that uplift well-being. Momentum of project execution is captured through a bottom-up approach. In unpicking features of solidarity, this study draws on empirical data and case studies with focus on NACDA, unrivalled in locality discourse. Shouldering development of heritage by looking inwards remain building blocks through member's contributions and collective efforts. Solidarity matched with resilience remains a neglected and often overlooked subject in development discourse. Use of maxims such as 'united we stand, divided we fall, 'let us look in one direction', 'unity is strength' mirrors philosophy embedded in VDAs. Yet, a contentious debate remains sustainability of mutuality, ethnic identity and social cohesion that permeates citizen efforts at organising from beneath.

Social Capital and elements of solidarity economy

In the face of state retreat in local development, the motive behind solidarity economy of citizens mobilizing from bottom to take charge of their destiny is aligned with concepts of social capital and ecological theory. It is about citizens organising from below, to provide key welfare packages that improve wellbeing for all. Village organizations remain a rallying voice in marshalling collective action for common good of members (Fonchingong, C. 2005). This paper argues that solidarity is a social engagement; a dialogic relationship that exists between reality and nuanced application of theory in context, mutual negotiation and assimilation of values appropriated to locality (see table 1).

Proponents of social capital argue that it is underpinned by social relations that work for collective interest of members. It recognises preparedness and tendency to sacrifice for one another and mostly commended for its tangible outcomes. Although ambiguity surrounds the concept, it is widely conceptualised as being the existence of social ties and the stock of active connections among people characterised by trust and reciprocity, and strategically mobilised by individuals and groups for particular ends (Coleman 1998, Putnam 2000; Woolcock 2000; Chaskin 2001). Elsewhere, it encompasses norms and networks facilitating collective and cooperative action for mutual benefit, despite its properties, problems and downside (Portes and Landolt 1996; Woolcock 1998; Fine 2001). Within the context of this research, social capital represents renewed sense of commitment to course of community through regeneration and collective progress to improve wellbeing of members (Fonchingong, C. 2005). As shown in table 1, members are buoyed by a sense of mutual assistance, interaction and direction. Lister (2010:3) indicates that common good is central to communitarianism, arguing individuals as social beings are embedded in national and local communities.

Using environment wisely and ensuring resources are not quickly depleted also come into equation. VDAs ensure traditional ecological practices are not a threat to landscape. They promote environmental awareness and education on farming practices like 'slash and burn' agriculture that may degrade environment and reduce soil nutrients. Village traditional authorities also grapple with clashes between farmers and graziers due to destruction of farm crops by graziers in search of green pasture. In assembling vital resources, however, shifting priorities and re-invigorating development initiatives can be problematic for entrenching solidarity. Afshar (2005:530) situates ecological perspective with fundamental question: are we adequately conserving and enhancing our natural environment—land, air, water, flora and fauna – for our ecological and human health?

Table 1: Elements of solidarity economy

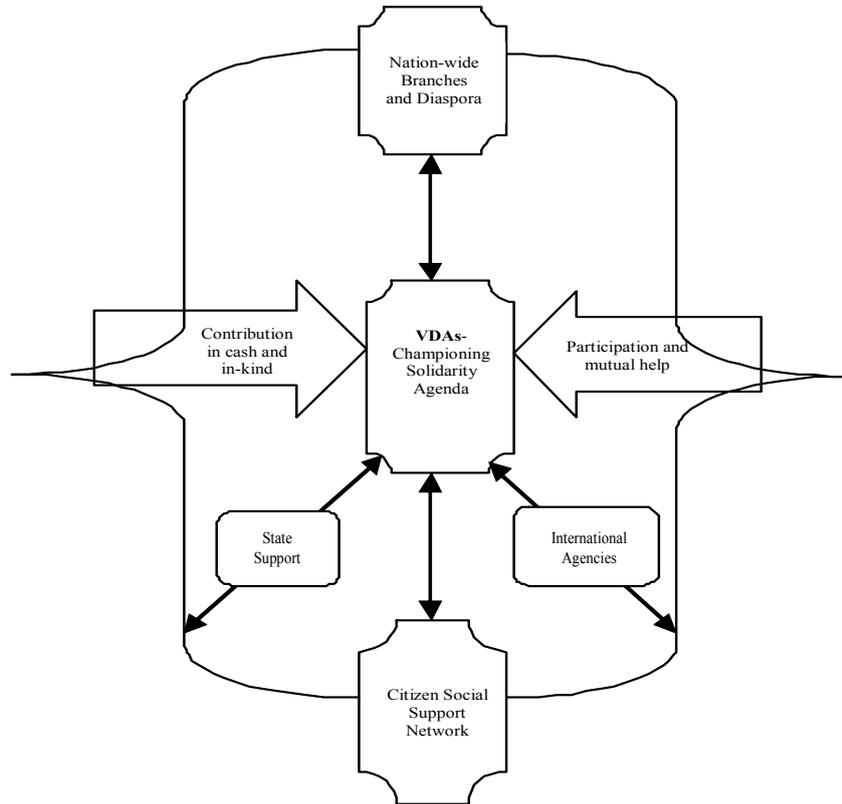
Elements	Linkage to VDAs
Traditional authority (Fon)	Village leadership and overseeing VDAs Land allocation for projects Dispute resolution Links with Diaspora and government officials Conferment of traditional titles Enforce communal values, ethics and common good
Elite Influence	VDA leadership and links with international agencies Advisory support to traditional authority Decision making and key consultations Fund raising architecture Cash contributions Political connections Community educative talks Links with Diaspora
Social cohesion (<i>Njangis</i> and social groups)	Social entrepreneurship and mutual benefit Social groups for women, men and youth Credit generation and microfinance Community mobilisation Up scaling participation Reinforced sense of cultural identity
Members' sourcing for funds	Members' contributions for projects Resource mobilisation and volunteering at key development events Cultural fundraising events/gala Contributions from Diaspora Funds from international development agencies and diplomatic missions Pledges
Diaspora	Diaspora congresses/gala to raise funds Website development Technical expertise and knowledge transfer Donations Material supply for specific projects Provision of specialist, essential equipment
Community participation	Cultural meetings and general assemblies Project implementation committees Leadership roles within VDAs Participation in community development days Ecological and environmental awareness
Cultural identity	Upholding heritage, language, and dialect Cultural dances, songs and music festivals Local dishes and gastronomy Eco tourism and preserving greenery Newsletter trumpeting solidarity Village almanac and magazine Museum, arts/crafts, antiques and sacred artefacts

Source: Compiled from Author's fieldwork (2012)

As table 1 indicates solidarity is anchored on common interest; cultural manifestations resonate as central trajectory of solidarity schema. At heart of matrix are traditional authorities and elite overseeing governance, though their overbearing influence can be detrimental to VDAs (Fonchingong, C. 2005). VDAs are increasingly challenged by

intrinsic and extrinsic factors, potentially injurious to successful implementation of projects. Projects executed include; provision of pipe borne water, construction of bridges, community halls, Fon's palaces, building and renovation of new and crumbling school classrooms, village markets, medical supplies to health facilities; digging and maintenance of roads. Amidst lofty efforts, quasi-traditional 'social capital' is problematic as VDAs battle to ensure development initiatives are achieved.

Figure 1: VDA solidarity operational framework



Source: Solidarity operational framework based on empirical data (2013)

As represented in figure 1, nationwide regional branches are functional external organs, vital in mobilising resources for VDA projects. Internally, village quarter heads are very instrumental in easing collection of funds by working laterally with traditional authorities. For villagers who refuse to pay development levies, they could face injunctions on their land, property and other investment they want to undertake in the village. This NACDA approach drives up regularity in membership contributions. Such units are also autonomous in commissioning projects that improve wellbeing of its members. Recently, the Batibo Cultural and Development Association (BCDA) acquired a piece of land in Yaoundé neighbourhood for the construction of a Community Hall. Upon completion, Hall will host social events such as births, marriages, graduations, and other social fetes for Batibo indigenes resident in Yaoundé.

NACDA as showcase

NACDA is borne of Awing village, found in Santa sub-division, Mezam division, North West region of Cameroon. Located in a region heralded for its self-reliance and mutual development initiatives (Fonchingong, C. and Fonjong 2002), NACDA occupies prime position in championing infrastructural provisioning through social relations.

Established 1962 in Buea, South West region of Cameroon, NACDA today counts 63 branches globally (12 in Diaspora); a women's wing (25 branches), youth wing with 15 branches; 9 quarter development unions and multiple dance groups and other social networks (tax groups) nationwide (personal communication, NACDA executive, 29 December 2012). The current leadership is marshalled by Ntsonkefo'o Peter Akote, 10th President General of NACDA and under his stewardship the organisation celebrated its 50th anniversary (November 2012). At inception, NACDA's mission was unequivocal: *'uniting around self-reliant development of Awing Fondom, creating an atmosphere of peace, promoting its diverse cultural and social acumens, and projecting a good image of the Fondom'*.

What is remarkable with NACDA trajectory are footprints steeped in ideology of rallying fellow indigenes of Awing dispersed over plantations of South west region in early 19th century. From its modest beginnings, its solidarity agenda grew stronger with first meeting of Awing indigenes leading to creation of Awing Youth association (AYA) in December 1962. Being receptive to new ideas and bent on fine-tuning its agenda to changing social environment, the movement had a name change from AYA to Ndong Awing Cultural Association (NACA) in 1966 and renamed NACDA in 1980 up till date. Perhaps, NACDA name change captures dynamics of an evolving solidarity agenda that sets the stage for futuristic thinking. In 1976, NACDA's pioneer constitution was voted and premiere almanac launched. Its operational structure is directed by general assembly that holds midyear and end of year; at these assemblies, community initiatives are deliberated and actions agreed.

The 50th anniversary showcased NACDA as a development association that has weathered the storms in providing much needed infrastructure to Awing indigenes. The British High Commissioner to Cameroon –Bharat Joshi and Swiss Ambassador to Cameroon Urs Berner were among international dignitaries in attendance (The Post 2012). As prelude to golden jubilee, Nico Halle, influential Awing elite said: *'we are going to consolidate love, peace and progress. If you don't develop your village, you cannot develop your country'* (Cameroon Tribune, 27 June 2012). NACDA's achievements within 50 years were listed as: opening of schools including mission, private and government nursery, primary, secondary and technical schools, construction of classrooms and provision of benches, constructed and maintained a good road network system, availability of pipe borne water to about 63% of the population of Awing, built and renovated Fon's palace, built and maintained bridges, provided electricity, health care, a community hall and existence of pit latrines in markets to improve sanitation.

Table 2: NACDA projects realised, timescales of implementation and costs

Projects	Timescale	Cost (millions)
2010 Fact book (census and development needs data)	3 months	4,293,500
School-GSS Awing-Azane (2 classrooms, 2 staff rooms plus 5 chamber toilets)	1 year	8, 273,250
Adopt a spot (roundabouts with directions sponsored by families)	1 year	5,567,600
Awing Education Enhancement Foundation (endowment where interest is used to provide scholarships annually)	Ongoing	22,793,500
Equipping medical centre	3 months	4,399,000
Awing Fon's Palace and upgrade for golden jubilee	3 years	25,232,566
Swiss water project extension project (80% sponsored by Swiss government and 20% by NACDA)	5 months	5,556,120
German water extension project (75% sponsored by GTZ and 25% NACDA cash input)	4 months	5,175,000
GPS to digitize all Awing villages	Ongoing	1,703,000

Source: Author's assemblage from NACDA personal correspondence (18 February, 2013).

As shown in table 2, major projects undertaken by NACDA include: construction of the Fon's palace residence, development of a fact book, water and electricity supplies, cultural halls, roads rehabilitation, construction and equipping of a permanent secretariat for the NACDA in Ndong Awing. Other projects are: equipped hospitals and health centres. A novelty is creation of Awing Association of Civil Engineers for road maintenance. Also, fact book details mapped development priorities, usually distributed to government, diplomatic missions, development agencies and international organizations for assistance. NACDA's buoyancy and development drive is attributed to citizen's involvement, accountable and transparent management of resources by all and sundry.

Voices of stakeholders

In championing grassroots development, VDAs rely on diverse forms of support (table 1). Elements of solidarity equation resonates with tiers of support from traditional leadership, citizen's social support network, elite and sourcing for much needed funds and input of Diaspora. Interviews with different elements hail VDAs as key drivers in village transformation amidst shrinking state intervention. Summing up achievements of NACDA during the 50th anniversary celebrations, a top elite – Professor Mbangwana surmised: *'there is need to harness Diaspora support from our sons, daughters and well-wishers in order to make even greater strides in what can make Awing a better haven to live in.'* He went further: *'NACDA should consult constantly with vital elements in the Diaspora since the remittances from here can be a vital element to boost their development. Let us take advantage of the new dawn in*

the life of NACDA'. Signalling a redoubling of efforts by NACDA to work with government, same elite mentioned: *'if government provides the enabling environment, may be through roads, then NACDA will do the rest that it will take to lure tourists to Lake Awing. The development of the Awing Lake can transform the whole of Santa subdivision and the rest of the Region for a better tomorrow'*. Another influential elite - Barrister Nico Halle *'praised the efforts that Awing has made through NACDA and said they were successful, especially for the past one decade thanks to the support of their Fon, whom he said was a man "of peace, love and harmony"*. He added, NACDA's achievements had also come as a result of sage counsel offered them by their Fon (The Post, 2012).

At NACDA's 50th jubilee, The British High Commissioner put NACDA development agenda in context: *'only you can make your country an emerging economy by 2035. We can only help but we can't tell you how to do it'*. On its part, government represented through a representative of the Ministry of Culture lauded NACDA development drive offering financial support with the sum of 2 million frs CFA. The representative went further: *'I want to express my congratulation to the job so far done by NACDA. You have contributed a lot to change the image and the lives of the people of Awing. We are behind you'*. In typical style of unfulfilled promises and often lethargic government support, the representative said: *'In the weeks ahead, a team from the Ministry of Culture shall, if the Minister so accords, be in Awing to prospect the possibilities of setting up a cultural museum there'* (The Post Newspaper, November 19, 2012).

Women are key participants in pushing forward development drives. Numerically, they represent a strong force in bolstering attendance at general assemblies, mid-year meetings and other regional branch festivities to raise funds and build solidarity. One of the women from NACDA women's wing interviewed intimated: *'We're trying our possible best to see that Awing progresses by always paying our contributions as expected of us. The major problem we have at home is with the Mbororo people whose cattle destroy our crops. With the losses and poor harvest, we may not raise our development levy on time, but we always try and pay everything'*. A NACDA President of the Women's wing said: *'when I became president in 2010, my main mission was to foster greater unity amongst women in Awing under one umbrella, to work for the progress of our village. The number of women attending meetings and taking part in NACDA activities has increased. We continue to sensitize mothers and our daughters on hygiene issues and diseases like malaria, cholera and HIV/AIDs. We also emphasize cultural norms and encourage women to take up leadership positions in NACDA'*. Interrogated why NACDA has been a success so far, another female participant said: *'as women, we are given room to go ahead and initiate our own projects. The women wing is a very important arm of NACDA; it is like a voice for women in NACDA. Projects like health centre, social centre and women's centre are projects that mean a lot to us, so we try and raise funds to enable us complete projects'*. A member from women's wing of a regional branch said: *'As NACDA grows, we can beat our chests to say we were part of it and contributed to its growth. We have succeeded in repairing the roof and pillars of women centre in the village which was a problem'*.

Gender issues and contours of participation

Leadership positions in VDAs and NACDA in particular are strong benchmarks for participation, social cohesion and giving back to community. Men generally hold top leadership positions within VDAs while women are more active as presidents in women's wings. There are no legal restrictions for women not holding key leadership positions; most women do not challenge themselves to compete for senior leadership positions; this may be down to dominant patriarchal traditions and mindset that ascribes decision making to men. For example, in NACDA general executive structure, 15 men hold high leadership positions and only 2 women, whilst in women wing, women keep 25 key positions. In technical subcommittee chairpersons, there are 10 men and no women, 7 men in quarter development unions and no women while for branch presidents (worldwide), there are 59 men and 3 women (personal correspondence with NACDA executive, 19 February 2013). The women's wing is a good platform for women's issues to be factored into debates at general assemblies. It gives women latitude and leverage to undertake projects that address women's specific needs. Within NACDA, about one third of development dues are given to women's wing; for instance if a female member contributed 3,000 frs CFA, one third (1,000frs) is passed over to women's wing.

Development dues and members' levies are prime building blocks of capital for execution of key projects. Most VDAs have agreed annual flat rates of contribution for men and women. Whilst gender is a key consideration to determine levies, earning potential and area of residence are other determinants. Most of these village development organisations have operational branches in Diaspora that operate as autonomous entities, yet underpinned by strong links to their heritage. Diaspora also makes significant contribution toward earmarked projects and undertakes specific development projects in liaison with village development executives and project committees.

There are agreed levies for residents in village, residents outside village and in other parts of continent (Africa) and residents in diaspora (overseas). For example, the NACDA levied men resident in Awing village 2000 frs CFA and 1,000 frs CFA for women who reside in the village, 6,000 frs for men residing outside village and other parts of Africa whilst women in this category are charged 3,000frs CFA. For residents in Diaspora, men and women have equivalent levies of 20,000 FRS CFA.

Mobilising capital for projects is the hallmark of citizen participation in communitarian ventures, echoing notions of mutual engagement (Fonchingong, C. and Ngwa, 2005). Reconciling the dialectics of gender and participatory development is an approach VDAs are keen to engage with to mobilise much needed capital for projects and to create a shared sense of community identity and inclusion amongst members. Oakley (1991) highlight 'consciousness-gap' between leaders of a society and masses being close with people seen as the subjects of their own worlds rather than objects of other people's worlds. Through payments into development levies, members gain the strength to create solidarity spaces and to build up social, cultural, traditional and economic assets - drivers of collective action. Gender considerations in working out costs and input into project cycle through contributions in cash and in kind remain vitally important. VDAs have stipulated (statutory arrangements for upfront payments and calendar of payments is usually twice a year- at midpoint and end of year. This enables a list to be drawn up and monitored for chasing up those who are falling behind payments.

Apart from mandatory development dues, voluntary and on the spot donations and pledges are welcomed during general assemblies of the association and at various regional blocs/assemblies nationwide. Funds collected are then transmitted to the general treasurer and financial secretary of the association. Such complex organisational structure of most VDAs often leaves room for financial malfeasance and other underhand operations that have compromised funds sourced.

Table 3: Some annual VDA levy for men and women resident in village

Village development Association	Men	Women
Aghem Cultural and Development Association	3000	1000
Baba I cultural and Development Association	1000	500
Babanki Tungo	5000	3000
Bafut development Manjong	1000	500
Batibo Cultural and Development Association	5000	3000
Mankon Cultural and Development Association	2500	1000
Mbatu Cultural and Development Association	2000	1000
Metta Cultural and Development Association	4000	2000
Moghamo Cultural and Development Association	5000	3000
Nsei Union	6000	3000
Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association	2000	1000

Table 3 indicates annual levies and financial input of members that goes into project implementation. Other sources of funding include free will donations by members, proceeds from traditional fundraising and gala events, direct assistance (cash and expertise) from local government services; special grants disbursed by diplomatic missions and embassies and funds solicited from international development agencies. It should be noted that development levies are open to adjustments and may be revised upwards or downwards as agreed by members at general assemblies of Association. Though levies are streamlined along gender lines, some VDAs spell out categorizations per economic activity and income levels worked out on earning potential for public servants and business potential for private sector members. As highlighted with BCDA, top elite are levied heavily; public servants of upper-income, middle income and lower income are taxed differently. Depending on project under execution, cost and timescale of project, levies may vary considerably.

Local development through contributions in kind has evolved. In 1960s through 1980s, community participation in development projects such as roads, bridges, pipe borne water, school buildings, health centres and palaces required specific contributions in cash and in kind. For example, men were required to provide palm-wine, 'head pan/ heaps of sand', cleared the bushes, dug rocks and polish stones while women followed suit with smoothing patches and canals, supporting with cooked food (Fonchingong, C. 2005, Fonchingong, C. and Ngwa 2005). Recently, participation is less in kind and more of cash contributions. Generally, more large scale community projects require expertise and specialised labour, often remunerated. For NACDA, road projects require bulldozers to be fuelled; equipment donated for a couple of days by an indigene. Construction work is now done by trained builders and roofing by skilled carpenters. They do such jobs at discounted rates less than what is charged generally and they get 'some appreciation' for giving back to their heritage.

Amassing capital via social support networks

Though cultural ramification of VDA drive remains unquestionable, volatility and fragility of its social, economic and solidarity agenda are proving problematic going forward. With dwindling economic resources, diminished sense of participation, exacerbated by drop in in-cash and in-kind contributions, VDAS are battling to forge a social enterprise model that can deliver direct benefits for community members. Rotating credit and saving associations (*njangis*) are embedded as part of cash generation; vital linchpin and forms of direct finance for VDA development initiatives (Fonchingong, C. 2006).

In NACDA branches nationwide and Diaspora, *njangis* are bedrock for generating and re-distributing cash, pooled together from member's contributions. Members use *njangis* as a platform for saving up against development dues and raising much needed capital for small scale entrepreneurial ventures and business operations. *Njangis* also incorporate a social solidarity agenda as members put aside some funds (trouble funds) for events like deaths, births, marriages and other emergencies. In Diaspora, NACDA branches have life insurance programs whereby in case of death of a member, premiums from insurance scheme ensures hitch-free repatriation of corpse and surviving family supported financially. While cash reserves act as a springboard for entrepreneurship ventures enabling members to address other basic needs, often these ventures do not yield tangible returns. This is attributable to default coupled with corruption and underhand arrangements.

Influential and contentious role of elite

Elite are very influential in embedding solidarity economy ethos, propelling village development organisations. Most VDAs rely on vital connections and cash contributions of their elite. Elite input and direct cash injections are useful in canvassing and generating much needed resources. NACDA deserve mentioning through input of its elites. On the grand occasion-golden jubilee celebration (2012), Barrister Nico Halle - NACDA's most influential elite was commended by current executive. Under Halle's tenure as President from 1998 to 2004, some key projects were implemented viz: a multi-purpose Fon's palace and electricity supply project that provided Fon's palace with electric power.

Other VDAS rely on their elite for much needed capital in implementing identified projects. Elite categorisation is the order of the day orchestrated through elite grading. This takes form of identification of public servants working for government outside the village. From list put together under auspices of Fon and President of VDAs, elite identified are contacted and levied according to their earning potential within civil service. An elite militating in BCDA disclosed: in a recent project to expand and refashion the Batibo Fon's palace; servants were classified according to their earning potential and work in government departments. Senior public servants, particularly members of parliament were levied approximately 8 million francs (equivalent of £8,500). Other senior servants, likes of top ranking officials in government ministerial department were levied about 2 million, whilst others in the teaching corps and academia were levied 450.000 FRS (about £500). The amount levied is paid in instalments within a specified timescale, usually one to two years. Junior public servants are also levied according to their earning potential and categorisation approach is replicated for big and small business operators.

Whilst cash contributions are vitally important in elite interventions within VDAs, elite are also instrumental in community mobilisation through educational and

awareness raising campaigns and schemes. Drawing on their expertise, elite participate in educative talks such as civic participation, parental role in educational advancement of children, promoting scholarship; public health campaigns, talks on hygiene and sanitation, disease prevention such as cholera, malaria amongst other subjects. However, elite involvement has been controversial due to vested political interest and personal aggrandisement (Fonchingong, C. 2005). Unquestionably, dynamic leadership of elite and reliance on individuals of proven integrity, and development oriented attitude has led to positive outcomes. Shrinking enthusiasm and goodwill can backfire in long run as VDAs struggle to fill gaps left by departing influential elite.

Disjuncture between VDAs and State

Whilst role of states in engineering local development remains crucial, VDAs drive to build a solidarity economy are often hampered by lethargic state policies. VDAs mention government input in promoting community ventures through creation of schools, support for other key infrastructural development through deployment of trained staff and personnel. However, VDA-state interaction is characterised by dithering, costly for smooth functioning of such projects. For instance, with execution of school projects, community members felt that government creating schools through ministerial decisions should be accompanied by other logistics of sorting out location; land and planning within suitable timescales, bolstered by competent expertise. Interviewees indicate that whilst government creating a village school is vital, it does not take away hard work of making available land, sorting out planning decisions and school buildings to ensure a smooth take-off. Also, provision of essential furnishing and didactic materials and recruitment of teachers to man schools are major hurdles.

Equally, influential elites with wherewithal to support communities with key projects face problem of state interference. Such interventions cannot be freely executed without permission from state officials and regional administrators. Though VDAs require approval for certain projects from local administration, navigating often complex administrative bottlenecks and bureaucracy has proven costly forcing elites to pull out rather than engage. In building solidarity, VDAs rely on influential elites to sell its development agenda, obtain vital funds and state support, this carries potential risks as elites in turn, fall back on their kith and kin for political support to serve their political ambition. The contentious, often times unclear positioning of elite using VDAs as a staging post for vested political interests comes under spotlight (Fonchingong, C. 2005). In extreme cases, elite machinations with regard to state apparatus has proved controversial; stifling solidarity as citizens are split along party lines and ideologies. This is counterproductive and does not serve overall, collective interests of VDAs.

Towards a social enterprise model

Proponents for a solidarity economy have argued that it gives citizens the chance to address excesses and shortfalls of capitalism and free markets. Based on rationality of common interests, within development associations are credit associations (njangis) that generate cash and give loans to members at very low interest rates. However, reducing the burden on members going forward, VDAs have to rethink their strategy by exploring a business model that generates more income to improve livelihoods for poverty stricken citizens. As agriculture is mainstay for most rural dwellers, creation of mutual agricultural cooperatives to better market goods and services is a proposition. Within VDAs and social groups are common initiative groups formed by

members to guarantee access to basic loans and start off capital for members. Stepping up through creation of cooperatives can ensure a bigger market and increased economic prospects of VDAs to reinvest in welfare schemes. Such schemes hold the potential of improving household cash income and reduce poverty. This thinking is aligned to Samuels John (2008); he explains that solidarity economy is based on four ethical pillars: ethical production, ethical investment, ethical market, and ethical consumption.

Essence of solidarity is fairness, social justice, and distribution of surplus while moving away from profit as driving force. As shown in elements of solidarity (table 1) and from snippets of voices, investment in arts and crafts, ecotourism (Lake Awing), museum development, digital economy and web based marketing are projects with huge potential of generating much needed capital. Ploughed back capital enables VDAs to embark on large scale infrastructural project that require colossal injection of funds. Case studies from Latin America and Brazil in particular discuss concept, advantages and challenges of cooperatives in building solidarity economy (Haarmaan Claudia and Dirk Haarmaan 2011).

Galvanising sense of community

Poverty, soaring unemployment and inadequate access to essential services jeopardize and compromise efforts at community building. VDAs are finding it hard to embark on large scale and capital intensive projects like electrification, water supply that require huge injection of funds and sustained contributions. In sourcing for much needed funds, some VDAs are diversifying their strategy by canvassing for funds from some embassies, diplomatic missions and international development agencies. Such assistance is often in direct cash contribution and technical expertise. VDAs also count on contributions from kith and kin in diaspora communities (Mercer and Page 2010) for financial support, often sporadic.

Addressing how competing interests generated by overarching priorities from different branches not reconciled at general assembly can prevent development initiatives from yielding desired results. To ensure viability of VDAs going forward, contemplating role of a specialist to oversee project implementation, to coordinate training for sustainable management of projects post implementation is needed. Project experts can also develop project proposals for funding from international organisations and other development agencies.

VDAs may well revisit their management structure. In most VDAs, tendency is for traditional rulers, presidents and chairs of committees to take major decisions which may not serve collective interest of community members. To foster greater solidarity, regular consultation between Presidents, key members of executive, other committees overseeing implementation of projects and citizens' regional blocs is mandatory. Counting on heritage and cultural sense of identity to push forward communitarian development, executing projects that resonate directly on wellbeing can galvanise participation. Apart from grand infrastructural projects with bearing on community development, in long-term, most community members may not reap tangible benefits from projects as wider impact on individual households is difficult to measure. However, respecting timescales and operational demands in line with ethos of giving back to heritage may hold answer to survival of VDAs. The intricate and complex structures of VDAs do not allow for quick decision making. Also, financial accountability is crucial in building resilience of VDAs. Governance structures that ensure transparency are crucial; not well managed risk evaporating community

dynamism in communitarian endeavours. Perhaps, NACDA's resilience is attributed to accountability structures embedded in association.

Conclusion

VDAs are a binding glue of citizen strategizing, emblematic of a solidarity economy. With focus on NACDA, this paper has unloaded core elements of solidarity economy buffered by social cohesive community and common good fostered by spirit of mutual help. NACDA as a development outfit is a reference point signalling that development begins with right mindset, whilst solidarity cements foundation. The potency of VDAs remains a central feature of solidarity economy anchored on a valorised and provincial community. As architects of local development championing service provision and poverty reduction, VDAs require restructuring to stay afloat. In spite of great strides to bridge development gaps; VDAs are plagued by surmountable and insurmountable difficulties. The fundamental question is: Are VDAs capable of sustaining a solidarity economy that works to socially uplift its members? For VDAs to stay buoyant, redirecting dynamism from cultural festivities to boost developmental work is imperative; developing a social enterprise model that yields communal benefits, fashioning an organisational framework that engenders participation whilst galvanising community members for mutual engagement is critical.

In building sustainability, VDAs require paradigm shifts in management structures to reflect community expectations; address unmet needs that impact livelihoods. As key regional development blocs, VDAs can constitute a linchpin of local democracy by pressing and forging partnerships with government to promote wellbeing of citizens. Its dynamism of engagement mirrored through citizen's social groups, participatory process and community resilience is built on looking at past successes as a locomotive. VDA survival can be guaranteed by how well tangible and intangible returns for members are balanced within framework of solidarity agenda. Up scaling citizen's efforts require calibrated support, synergy with global institutions like World Bank, United Nations agencies and other international development organisations, based on social and economic realities on ground.

Acknowledgements:

I am grateful to NACDA executive, Fogang Mbangwana (NACDA Coordinator in Diaspora) for vital information provided and to all interviewees for their invaluable input.

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