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Are Village Development Associations (VDAs) Resilient?

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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

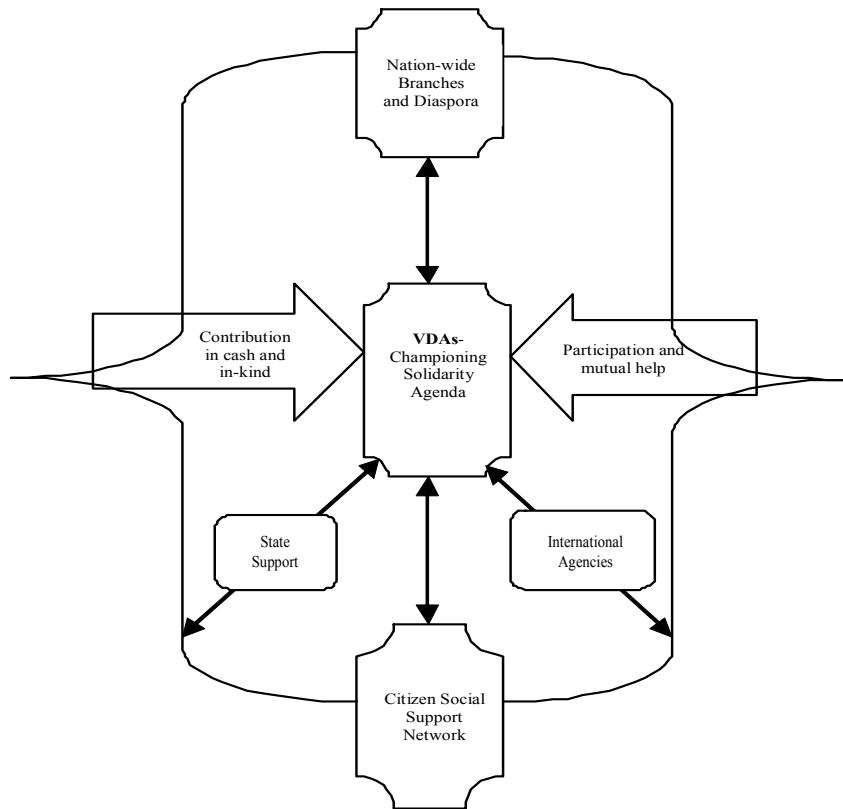
Elements	Linkage to VDAs
Traditional authority (Fon)	Village leadership and overseeing VDAs Land allocation for projects Dispute resolution Links with Diaspora and government officials Conferment of traditional titles Enforce communal values, ethics and common good
Elite Influence	VDA leadership and 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 fêtes 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 Fodom, creating an atmosphere of peace, promoting its diverse cultural and social acumens, and projecting a good image of the Fodom*'.

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

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