

STATUS REPORT

RELUFA'S FOOD SOVEREIGNTY PROGRAMME

TWO YEARS AFTER ITS LAUNCH



RELUFA

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In 2006, RELUFA launched a food sovereignty program in the Far North province of Cameroon. In light of the recurring hunger problems encountered by many communities in this part of the country, the network identified speculation practices on the grain markets as systematic cause behind this problem, and village grain banks as an appropriate and sustainable solution to the situation. Started two years ago, the grain bank operations are having a considerable impact on the beneficiary populations. It is important, however, to better organize and expand the program in order to have a greater impact, and to help bring the various groups together into a federation so that they can be the principal actors in advocating better ways to take charge of their needs, and for better food sovereignty policies at the national level.

Introduction

The current world food crisis has the most devastating effects in Africa. A 2006 Oxfam report revealed that 55% of people in Central Africa had not sufficient food to eat compared to 37% for Africa in general. The same study also reported that the average annual number of food emergencies in Africa had practically tripled since the mid-1980s. Cameroon belongs to the list of those countries struck by the crisis. Since several years, and on a recurring basis, many communities throughout the country experience a critical food situation, a phenomenon never seen in this country that is known for being food self-sufficient. This difficult food situation is even more prominent in the northern regions of the country, partly due to natural causes, and partly man-made.

Amongst the natural causes of hunger in the Extreme-North Province of Cameroon can be mentioned in the first place the drought caused by the expansion of the desert, which has a great impact on food security. Other natural causes that over the years have been pointed out include the bad quality of soil and destruction of the crops by insects and animals (leaf eating caterpillars, grasshoppers, birds and pachydermatous animals).

However, beside the natural causes of hunger hide more systemic realities that are less visible but much more powerful and anchored in local practices : human affairs, through the practice of speculation ; weak national agricultural policies ; the inadequate intervention by the state, and the food distribution policies – useful but not sustainable – of international organizations.

- Speculative practices

Within traditional Cameroonian culture, rural areas always produced food in sufficient quantities to feed themselves as well as to feed the urban regions. Since several years, however, the phenomenon seems to be reversing; cities now have better access to products from international markets, and are therefore also hit by the soaring international prices, while villages have difficulty producing enough due to the cost of agricultural inputs, the high cost of living, and the total absence of agricultural subsidies from the state. The production output available at harvest time are in general bought by rich businessmen, who by purchasing large quantities, create shortages later on and increase the demand for food, which in its turn impact the food prices. This happens to the detriment of small producers who are no longer able to buy back their own production to feed their families.

- Liberalization of the agricultural sector and the weaknesses of national agricultural policies

Before the introduction five-year development plans and the structural adjustment program (when?), the state was the principal economic actor guided agricultural policies through development corporations and various public and parastatal organizations. The government invested money in food production, food processing, fertilization, etc. With the introduction of the structural adjustment programs directed by international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, the State adopted new agricultural policies marked by deregulation and privatization. The consequences: before the economic crisis of the nineties, the State invested 15 to 20% of

its total investments in agriculture, compared to only 5% since the economic crisis. If not embezzled, the prepared budgets are this way largely disconnected from the intervention strategies of the various state entities, whose responsibility is to ensure food sovereignty at the national level.

- The inadequacy of state intervention, emergency aid and food assistance

Since the beginning of the food crises, the principal response of the state consisted of either emergency food distributions to victims in the disaster struck areas, or of calling for international assistance. Though humanitarian assistance is laudable, it does not provide a sustainable solution to the problem. In certain cases it can even worsen food security by keeping the populations and the governments in a dependency mentality. Still, at the international level, food aid expenditures have increased drastically, while aid for agricultural production has diminished by almost half. It is important to improve the immediate responses to the food crises.

- Corruption

According to a study carried out in June 2006 by ACDIC (French acronym for the Citizen Association for the Defense of Collective Interests), it was clear how, because of bad budgetary management by the ministry for agriculture and due to the many corruption networks, “for every 100 CFA Francs allocated to the MINADER (Ministry for Agriculture and Rural Development), only 5 CFA Francs reach the farmers in rural areas”. Amongst the various methods used by the public agents in charge of this ministry, the study quotes subdividing public contracts, overcharged bills, and fictitious invoices, deliveries, and travels, etc. All these tactics contribute to the reduction of the amount that eventually reaches the peasants on the ground.

In 2005, an alarming situation made headline news in the country. Due to low and very unequally distributed rainfall, several departments in the Far-North Province recorded a bad harvest season, forecasting a very difficult year at the food level, one of the hardest in the last ten years. Several non-governmental and humanitarian organizations were on the alert for another crisis to hit Northern Cameroon. In fact, in addition to the drought and low rainfall, the already poor harvests also suffered from locust infestation. The Cameroonian government organized food distributions at a very limited scale, and as expected, called for international assistance.

Taken by the situation and urged by its member organizations operating in the north, RELUFA decided to act and engage in a food sovereignty program.

I. The Far North Province

The Far North Province covers a surface of 34.262 km², which is about 7.2 percent of the total surface of the country. With 16% of Cameroon’s total population, or approximately 2,634,000 inhabitants in 2004 (75% of whom live in rural areas) it has of all provinces the highest number of inhabitants and is the most densely populated. The

people are mostly sedentary, but nomadic populations are found in the northernmost point of the province, practicing the seasonal migration to new pastures, from the north to the south, or from the east to the west according to the time of the year.

Agricultural production mostly consists of grains (millet, sorghum, corn, rice), leguminous plants (groundnut, niébé) and cotton. Market gardening products, especially cucumbers, sweet potatoes and onions, are grown in the low lands and along the Logone river. Husbandry includes raising livestock (cattle, camels), small animals (goats), pigs and some are involved in fresh water fishery. Dietary customs in the rural zone are based on the consumption of sorghum and corn, with little protein intake.

A study on household food vulnerability (HFV) conducted by the World Food Program in 2004 classified the Province's divisions into three levels of vulnerability: strong, moderate or weak, and very weak. According to this classification, the various departments in the province appeared in the following order;

- Logone et Chari
- Diamaré
- Mayo Tsanaga
- Mayo Sava
- Mayo Danay
- Mayo Kani

II. RELUFA's program

Because of the focus by the government's and WFP's on the departments of Logone and Chari and of Diamaré, RELUFA decided to launch its pilot program in the Mayo Tsanaga division. Moreover, there had in this Division already been some experiences in village grain storage.

Before taking any action, RELUFA sought to understand the root causes of the reality prevailing on the ground. Besides the structural and natural causes mentioned above, the network identified the speculation practices by businessmen as one of the principal man made causes of the food crisis in the North. A combination of factors, however, contribute to this situation:

On one side the peasants sell a great portion of their produce during harvest season as it is the only time when the farmers can earn money to meet their family's other needs like healthcare and education. But they trade against a low price because of the abundance of grains on the market, and do not keep sufficient grain to cover the rest of the year until the following harvest season.

On the other side there are the speculators. During the harvest season, they generally come with huge sums of money and with trucks to buy up large quantities of grains. Some of these stocks are exported to neighboring countries, while the rest is stored in anticipation of the lean season. With granaries depleted of any reserves this period

bridges the time when produce from the preceding harvest is consumed, and the next season with the new yields.

During this period, the population is forced to “try and manage”, looking for money to buy food, eating any plants which may contain some nutritional value, or else to sell goods and livestock to feed themselves. It is generally the duration of the lean season that determines the seriousness of the food crisis. In general the lean season covers the months of July-August-September, when the reserve stocks are exhausted and the hunger settles in.

At this point in time, the speculators bring out their stored quantities, which they resell on the market at prices generally vary between double and triple the purchasing price at the time of harvest. The same farmers can no longer feed their families, and must sell their livestock or anything valuable to be able to eat. In 2006, the problem was so acute that the provincial authorities advised the groups against selling their harvests en-masse to large tradesmen. At the same time they discouraged the sales of large quantities to neighboring countries.

The program launched by RELUFA aims to make food available in the villages through all seasons of the year, and to allow those without financial means to still be able to afford it. RELUFA believes that a system should be set up that would prevent these crises, and give the farmers the tools needed to get to that point.

The operations carried out under the auspices of RELUFA aim at buying produce from the farmers at harvest time (i.e. to break the speculation), and storing it in the villages that participate in the food sovereignty program. These bags will be kept in granaries or in storage space made available by the villages as a contribution to the program. They will be preserved there until the lean season period. At that time, the groups will decide the most critical moment to open the granaries, and the terms for making the stocked up bags available to the populations in need. Two options are possible:

- For those without money, the grain bank can lend them a 100kg bag or half a bag, which they will repay in kind from the following harvest, with a small measure of in kind interest.
- For members who want to pay in cash the group can decide to sell the bags at a group price that lays somewhere between the original purchasing price at the preceding harvest and the actual market price. If there exist no critical need among its members, the group may decide together to sell at the market price.

III. The first experiences

The program began in 2006 when 18 villages were each granted sixty 100kg bags of millet, i.e. 6 tons per village. In April 2008, 16 other villages joined the program, bringing the total number of villages to 34.

The general goal pursued by this program is two-fold

- On the one hand, there is the immediate objective of making available to the groups what is needed to meet their daily food needs, and to do so in way that honors their human dignity.
- On the other hand there is the more important middle to long term goal of bringing the various groups together and create a strong union, that understands and can act upon market mechanisms as well as national and international policies; that will demand fairer agricultural and food policies; that will advocate for more investment in agriculture by the state, and support initiatives by the rural population, in order to claim the entitlement to healthy food as a basic human right.

IV. The Current Situation

- *On the functioning of the grain bank management committees and stock control*

The 34 villages covered by RELUFA's operations have perfectly integrated the program's philosophy, as well as the running of the grain bank's management office. They are fighting hunger while increasing their initially received grain stocks, and bring this way a broader solution for hunger relief in their communities.

- *System of grain bank operations*

When, during the lean season, the grain banks open their doors to clear the stocks, the groups apply two options: they either sell bags for cash or they give them as in kind loans, which are reimbursed at the following harvest with interest (still in kind) of around 10% of the borrowed quantity. By large, the majority of groups choose for in kind loans during the lean season period. In a few cases there is decided for the option of selling the bags, but this is happening at a rather small scale.

Each group decides independently on the regulations for the running of their grain bank, and there are several variations on the different rules that prescribe the management of the stocks. Certain groups, for example, loan their millet only to members of the group or the village, and sell it for cash to any outsider. Some use as interest rate one 'daro' (a traditional basin) of 16,5 kg per bag, as in the case of Gouloua village, while others apply a smaller measure of 12 kg. In most cases, the groups say they lend only to people whose moral standing and debt payment records are known to the village.

In the village of Gagala, for example, the group decided for any non-repayments by the prescribed date to take the money from the cotton harvest at a rate of 20,000fcfa per bag.

All groups have a management committee consisting of between 5 and 10 people to supervise the running of the grain bank, at least two of which are women. The boards have a good understanding of their missions, their roles and responsibilities, of the need for regular meetings, and when to open and close the grain bank, the need for good communication and transparency within the group, for book-keeping, for supervision of the association's bank account, etc.

V. Some of the results

1. In all groups, the food supply provided by RELUFA has reduced the impact of hunger during the lean season. These days, there is no longer the need for group members to sell personal valuables or livestock to buy food for their family, as the grain bank operations make food available in a way that better respects human dignity.
2. The operations' philosophy has been very well adopted by the groups, who in nearly all villages have increased the initial stocks they had received. From 60 bags at the beginning, the number of bags currently stored in most of the grain banks is around 80 bags, i.e. an average increase of 20 bags or 33% generated by the villages themselves. Within two years, they will through their own efforts and management system have doubled their stock. This way they will be able to look at more strategic issues which will require advocacy by those living at the grassroots level.
3. The management committees set up in the respective villages meet regularly with each other in the presence of the local trainer who is charged by the program to discuss with them the grain bank's operations. These occasions also make it possible for the committees to discuss other problems related to village life like water canalization, health centers, in short: local development. A great transparency has been observed in particular when it come to the revenues generated from cash sales, and those anticipated from the in kind transactions.
4. Several women are involved in the management committees, and in the two villages of Zidim and Douroum, the management committees are made up of women only. The active participation of women in this type of program strengthens their status in their communities.
5. Having heard about the program, new groups are making requests to extend the program to also include their village, because they believe they would appreciate the program's impact.

VI. On the program's general impact

RELUFA's food sovereignty program has a great impact on the communities and the life of the families involved in the program. It makes it possible for the groups to get organized to fight hunger in their area, and to be the key actors themselves in this fight. The harshness of the lean season offers little option for families struck by hunger, but to repurchase food in the market at inaccessible prices, or to borrow money at very high interest rates to buy millet, or otherwise to sell livestock if available so they can buy back food to eat. The beneficiaries of the program measure its positive impact by comparing their current situation to the practices and the reality of the time when the operations did not yet exist:

- Traditionally in this part of the country, whoever is starving "has the right" to turn to neighbors early in the morning to beg for food, but the tiny amounts they receive fall short to feed the family that day. Besides, having to beg on a daily basis is embarrassing for these families, who see the grain bank as a means to

restore their dignity. Even if they don't have money, rather than begging they prefer to borrow, and repay during the harvest season.

- Before, many group members traveled long distances to find food, either for the absence of large markets in their area, or because they hoped to find better affordable prices by going farther away. Nowadays with the grain bank, food is available in the village itself, at fair prices and with better options for group members without money.
- In other groups, people could borrow a bag of millet from close relatives during the lean season, and repay this loan at the next harvest with two or more bags, i.e. at a 100% interest rate! With the current storage operations, just a few kilograms of interest suffice, and only so because the grain banks does aim to increase its stocks.
- During the lean season the farmers generally sold their goods and livestock to buy food for their families. Now, even if they still sell livestock, it is no longer to buy food, but to meet other essential needs, notably to send children to school or to take care of their health needs
- Prior to RELUFA's launched of this program, several people left their village to offer their labor in the fields of others in order to earn money, and used this payment to buy food for their families. One of the group members in a participating village even spoke of a reduction in arguments and divorces among spouses since the arrival of the program in their village, as these used to be sparked by the hunger issue.
- In several groups, village storage already existed but was practiced foremost by tradesmen. They would buy food from the farmers at low prices during the harvest, store the stocks in the village, and in times of food shortages transport them to large markets or to the Provincial capital of Maroua to resell the bags at highly inflated prices. Void of commercial objectives, the new storage operations have a more human face. In these groups it is strictly prohibited to loan or sell bags to tradesmen: the food is only destined for families in urgent need of food.

VII. On the prospects

To have a greater impact, several scenario's present themselves for RELUFA's food sovereignty program:

- The construction of village granaries is becoming imperative. In several groups, the community grain bank is lodged at an individual's home. Elsewhere, the storage space has meanwhile collapsed while the bags are being stored in a different place (usually facilities of the cotton community group), or it has become too small, especially with the increased number of bags at the end of each year of operation. In the village of Zlakam, for example, the group now stores its stock in two different places, as the granary cannot hold anymore all of the stocks. The construction of new facilities would allow for a better conservation of the stocks and a clearer, more transparent management of the grain bank's operations.

- Offering the program to new groups, and if at all possible increase a grain bank's initial stock, so that all members of the group who want to borrow from the granary will indeed be able to do so.
- It is also important to start sowing the seeds for a future union or federation of all the currently participating groups, who then could have other existing groups in the region join to become greater in numbers and stronger in advocacy efforts for true food sovereignty. The goal of such alliance would be to share information on the course of the grain bank operations, to carry out reflections on the food situation that generally prevails in the region with proposals to the government or other partners to invest in agriculture in more sustainable ways, to claim the basic human right to healthy food, and to actively engage in initiatives that can stop desertification. The federation could also follow the budgets allocated to their area by the ministry for agriculture and other ministries in order to counter temptations to corruption. It is important to train groups in understanding national and global agricultural policies and food security strategies, and in raising their voice during decision making procedures on issues that will impact their lives. (vois=voix??). Several West African countries (Mali, Senegal, Niger) have a proven experience with well run and powerful federations. To inspire group leaders who will participate in the federation, it would be helpful if RELUFA organized exchange visits with one of these countries, for them to see successful examples of unions and to learn about issues those farmers have addressed in their advocacy.
- To help further increase living standards for communities participating in RELUFA's food sovereignty operations it would be helpful to link them with the network's micro-credit program, CAP. Several communities we met revealed to us that they sometimes take loans at interest rates of more than 50%. Since RELUFA has already developed a tool for micro-loans, the network should play a larger part in this field.
- It is also important to develop advocacy at the international level, the need to combat poverty not only through agricultural development, but also by creating a fairer playfield for these Cameroonian cotton farming communities who can't compete with subsidized American cotton that are dumped on the world market and thereby lower the earnings of these already poor communities.