

Food Sovereignty Newsletter

February 2009

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the first edition of RELUFA's Food Sovereignty Program newsletter. RELUFA started the food sovereignty program in 2006, with the aim of reducing the recurring problem of hunger in the Extreme-North Province of Cameroon, the poorest and most populated region of the country and a region that is also experiencing extensive desertification.

The food sovereignty concept was developed and presented for the first time by the organization Via Campesina during the 1996 FAO Food Summit in Rome. The concept's main principle is that countries should first use their agricultural resources to feed their own populations. Rather than reducing agriculture to the sole aspect of business, the concept also values equality and social justice whilst stressing the nutritional and environmental dimensions of agriculture.

At the global level, food sovereignty is presented as an international right, which allows countries or groups to select the best policies, adapted to their needs, without these policies having a negative impact on other countries' populations.

RELUFA is currently working with 34 communities in the Extreme North province and supports them in their efforts to fight against wide-spread food speculation practiced by rich businessmen. Local government authorities in the Extreme North recently set alarm bells ringing when they asked businessmen to limit the amount of food they export to neighboring countries. RELUFA considers hunger in a country as fertile and diversified as Cameroon, and in a continent as rich as Africa, as unjustifiable.

Through this program, RELUFA helps hungry populations in this part of the country to be able to feed themselves properly, and to sell the remaining harvests only if they have enough stock for the "lean season". This year RELUFA will work on bringing in new villages into the program, and will help the villages set up a regional cooperative, whose task would be to establish appropriate mechanisms to help their communities take charge of local cereal production networks.

To find out more, please visit the program's page on our [website](#).

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The Food Sovereignty Program – helping communities overcome the problem of hunger

by Christiana Oraghade, RELUFA volunteer



For many communities across Cameroon, regular access to food is either far from reach or else only available at highly inflated prices. Vulnerability to food insecurity is most visible in the northern regions of the country, mainly because of expanding desertification, the progressive disengagement of the State in the agricultural sector and local market forces.

In order to better understand the reasons behind the continued level of food insecurity and vulnerability in the Extreme North Province, RELUFA undertook a base study of the local food economy in 2005. In this study, RELUFA identified speculative market practices by local businessmen as being one of the principal causes

of food insecurity and vulnerability.

During the harvest season, when food prices are at their lowest, the businessmen regularly exploit the market system by buying large quantities of cereals. Part of their stock is exported to neighboring countries (Chad, Nigeria), whilst the rest is stored for the lean season (i.e. the season when people's food stocks are at their lowest, and hunger sets in). When the lean season arrives, they place their stock on the market at highly inflated prices, meaning that farmers are forced to take out loans or to sell their possessions and livelihoods in order to feed themselves and their families.

In order to break this cycle of exploitation RELUFA launched the Food Sovereignty program. The program helps the villages to buy produce harvested by the peasants and to preserve it in a storage bank or unit offered by the villages, in anticipation of the lean season. When the village is low in stock, the stored grain is open for business.

The program aims to make food available in the villages throughout the year. The stock is given to families either as a sale or in-kind loan. Those who buy would pay about the same amount asked during the harvest season; those without money can purchase with credit and repay during the following harvest season, adding a small interest (a few extra kilos). This form of operation differs from the food aid programs, which have as their main objective, short-term solutions to emergency situations but do not break the cycle of vulnerability and exploitation, and are not long-term solutions to food insecurity.

RELUFA instead works to give communities the resources they need to overcome food vulnerability. The Food Sovereignty Program is therefore one major project in achieving our goals to tackle poverty, economic injustice and hunger. The program has already achieved many milestones and is aiming towards a lasting change in the regional food economy and the way in which Cameroon produces and manages its food supply.

Program Update from the Extreme North

by Elias Gondji, Food Sovereignty Coordinator



The principal goal of the Food Sovereignty program is to support the food deficit in the Extreme North during the lean season, with basic stock of an average quantity of 6 tons per bank provided by RELUFA. The stock is replenished every year through a village storage operation, with the principal phases being stock inventory and destocking activities. The operation proceeds on the ground with implementation ensured by GIE ADERSA and ADESE, two RELUFA member organizations. Daily follow-up of the groups is conducted by two advisors and

a program supervisor. RELUFA's coordinator and the companionship facilitator also regularly support the team in the field. The program started with 18 groups, all located in the Mayo Tsanaga department. In 2008, the operation expanded into other districts and new groups. The number of groups grew from 18 to 34, i.e. an increase of 16 new groups. The project's zone of intervention extended to the Meri and Ndoukoula districts in Diamaré department. On the whole, the operation proceeded well with a good number of groups.

Achievements

The program has made great progress in its two years of operation. As our activities help to train communities to manage their own banks, it is the communities themselves that make the program succeed. The program's staff makes regular visits to the region, to speak to beneficiaries and get their feedback on our operations.



During our last visits, we undertook an assessment of the program's milestones. Based on what we were told by villagers, the program has helped villages to:

1. Better manage their food stocks
2. Understand the general procedure of managing a grain bank, setting up and running committees and inventory control
3. Be independent in the management procedure, including how to operate the bank
4. Integrate women's participation into the management – each community board has at least two women, and the management board of two villages – Zidim and Douroum – are made up only of women.
5. Increase from the initial stock received. Most communities have an increase from the 60 bags they received at the beginning. The average increase is currently 20 bags.
6. Spread the word. Many new groups are interested in joining the program, having seen the positive impact the program is making in the community.

7. Reduce the level of chronically hungry people in their community
8. Reduce the need to beg for food from neighbours
9. Reduce the level of debt, as people no longer take out loans with high interest rates
10. Reduce the need to travel long distances in search of affordable food
11. Reduce the need to sell goods and livestock to pay for food, thus allowing farmers to maintain their livelihoods.

As the program expands, we hope to welcome new villages and beneficiaries into the program, and therefore have a greater impact in the region. This is why it is important to continue this program and to frame it around a sustainable approach to improving access to food across Cameroon.

Challenges

There were, on the other hand, five groups with notable problems. With the help of a new advisor we were able to solve the problems in two groups and resume with our activities. The three other groups, however, continue to show problems, despite an information and evaluation mission led jointly by RELUFA's coordinator, ADESE and GIE ADERSA last August. The three groups concerned are Mandaya, Tchambi and Gueling.

2009 Objectives

For 2009 we propose, in addition to the regular activities, to start working with the groups to think about creating a cooperative or network consisting of regional cereal producers and storage groups, so that we are better able to control the cereal production system and to defend the interests of peasants with the public authorities and development organizations. We also plan to extend the program into other communities.

Cameroon's agricultural policies – a new approach

by Christiana Oragbade, RELUFA volunteer



The world is still recovering from the global food crisis, which saw an astronomical rise in the price of food grains the world over – price increases not seen since the 1970s. The cost of food seeds and staples, such as rice, corn and wheat, remained unaffordable for many poor communities for several months, forcing people either to reduce their daily food intake or else to buy cheaper foodstuffs.

Various reasons lie behind the increase. The high cost of oil, which is integral to the production and transportation of food; the increasing demand for feed grains for livestock (which in turn is itself experiencing rising demand from the middle classes in countries such as China and India), and speculative investment by global financial players seeking quick and high returns in the food investment market, all helped to push the price of staple foods higher.

The globalization of the food system and the liberalization of agricultural trade continue to have negative effects on the availability and affordability of food for poor communities, especially those in rural areas. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that over 960 million people are undernourished, with 40 million pushed into the hunger trap in 2008 alone. This means that almost 1 billion people cannot afford to adequately feed themselves and their family.

The global food crisis certainly did not miss Cameroon. The riots in February 2008 were due in part to the rising daily cost of living, including the price of oil and food staples. Everybody was affected by the food price hikes, but no more so than the rural poor. Global price fluctuations such as this are why a radical change in Cameroon's agricultural policy is needed. There needs to be greater attention on reducing food insecurity amongst the poor.

Investing in new technologies, financial assistance for farmers, a common regional approach and new policy on improving local food production and supply are some of the best measures needed to prevent poor communities from falling into poverty and hunger. The Government of Cameroon should not continue to appeal and wait for emergency food aid; national and regional action is needed to ensure sustainable food security across the country.

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