Transforming Citizen-Leadership Engagement, Governance Institutions and Development in Communities or Quarters: The Example of Mile 19 in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Much of the world, including Cameroon, is lagging on its promise to achieve Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The survival and progress of many is blighted. Yet countries such as Cameroon, which are well endowed with natural and human resources, can more than achieve MDGs, eradicate poverty and live up to the mandate of their Constitutions. This paper presents an EITD Research intervention model that encourages and helps entrepreneurial activism and responsibility in initiatives to meet priority population needs in communities or quarters. Using Mile 19, a village in Cameroon, as example of the model at work; the paper advances thinking on the issues and raises awareness of the need for reforms, especially in governance and its impacts on opportunities and challenges for enhancing value in locally generated development processes, as well as on-the-ground effectiveness in learning that employs open or distance education methodologies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Governance framework documents such as Constitutions or Association Articles show how we (as individuals, groups or organisations including states and political parties) can build, maintain or destroy ties with one another in efforts to address issues collectively. The approaches are many and various. They present opportunities and challenges, both old and new, for accomplishing objectives. Cameroon, for example, inherited a colonial administration that was hostile to local interests. Its workings are still dominated by central authorities who appoint local administrators and decide policies, which often suppress local needs and initiatives. Far from arresting the trend, ongoing central government efforts to decentralise public administration appears instead to increase its contagion. Global compromises, such as Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) adopted at the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in 2000, have also been having the effect of dousing or sacking collective aspirations and local capabilities in resource rich countries.

Can these trends be arrested and reversed? Much of the world, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, is lagging on its promise to achieve MDGs, even as the goals represent only a fraction of what country Constitutions mandate states to guarantee as citizen rights and freedoms. Indeed, almost all the goals are not expected to be achieved at current trends in sub-Saharan Africa. Actions such as doubling aid, removing trade barriers, increasing the number of teachers and health workers, improving the private sector and involving local government in development projects are being advocated as requirements to bring rapid progress to the fight against poverty.

Nevertheless, experiences of countries such as Cameroon in sub-Saharan Africa show that much of the advocated poverty alleviation action could be misplaced. In well over a decade, Cameroon has been taking measures with increasing aid flows, democratising politics and liberalising trade opportunities, training more teachers and health workers, privatising state owned corporations and decentralising public administration. But, instead of reducing, poverty has been increasing for the vast majority of the population in Cameroon. The country's urban and rural development appears increasingly unplanned and poorly managed, resulting waste, a lot of waste, and inequity. Government looks increasingly rudimentary and unable to function without bribery and corruption.

The population has taken to the streets on several occasions to protest their government's failure to act on behalf of the country, as conditions worsen. A number of elections have been organised (some hotly contested), producing multiparty parliaments, coalition governments and reforms. But, individual rights and freedoms remain far from being guaranteed institutionally. Contrary to the Constitution of Cameroon, force, rather than reason, is nearly always relied upon to uphold state authority in the country. Policy processes remain largely unresponsive and unaccountable to public demands.

Available education opportunities have been many and increasing. They are also using open or distance learning methodologies increasingly. However, the effected change on-the-ground has scarcely been: promoting genuine dialogue; prioritising population needs; developing and agreeing policy contents, implementation and evaluation mechanisms; enhancing relationships within and between various sectors of society; and, improving human resources and productivity. By focusing on these, in citizen-leadership engagement, governance institutions and development processes, EITD Research has been strategically assisting democracy and learning effectively.

2. ABOUT EITD RESEARCH AND INTERVENTION GOALS

Research for Enterprise, Industries, Technology and Development (EITD Research) is an independent dynamic research and policy education institution founded in 1992. We work on development issues related to technology, enterprise and industries. We are a private non-profit making non-governmental association that receives support from foundations, governmental and inter-governmental institutions, private corporations and concerned individuals.

Our task is to seek solutions to pressing development concerns and assist society to take, with responsibility, opportunities offered by science in the use of technology for development via enterprise and industries. In addition to providing field services and technical support, we develop and circulate information on a wide range of issues, advocating strategies and making policy recommendations.

We promote education or learning opportunities as forums in which the needs and values of society interact with participants as they exchange information, share experiences and carryout activities that can impact politics, the economy, society and/or the environment. In the process, government is recognised as being in tiers, with each level of administration playing roles in the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies, laws and other regulations. Instead of being passive as other perspectives often claim, local interventions help or frustrate wider efforts to achieve goals.

Notwithstanding MDGs, the goals of governance often expressed in EITD Research interventions have been for:

➢ Increasing poverty eradicating economic growth;
➢ Securing justice and predictability in society;
➢ Increasing competitiveness in political and economic transactions;
➢ Improving responsiveness and accountability in management; and,
➢ Ensuring individual and environmental cleanliness and health.

Our understanding of these demands, and the policy reforms needed to achieve them in society, has been growing with the wide range of EITD Research activities over the years.

3. THE EITD RESEARCH INTERVENTION MODEL

The approach we use, which we call the Community or Quarter Action Committee (CAC/QAC) Intervention Model of EITD Research, is simple. It is about encouraging and assisting entrepreneurial activism to meet population needs in communities or quarters by:

➢ Establishing and running Action Committees in communities or quarters for various population needs such as education, health, housing and employment. The Committee usually takes on the name of the issue/need it is set up to tackle. For example, a CAC/QAC addressing education needs would be referred to as Community Education Committee or Quarter Education Committee (CEC/QEC). Usually, the CAC/QAC is elected in a general meeting of the community or quarter.

➢ Ensuring Action Committees act on the community or quarter needs. Having obtained its mandate, the CAC/QAC is empowered to seek and obtain baseline information in its community or quarter by, for example, conducting a census in its community or quarter. The CAC/QAC is then required and assisted as necessary to use the obtained information to: (1) Quantify population needs in the community or quarters; (2) Devise options and plans for meeting the needs; (3) Discuss available options and plans with the community or quarter in general meetings; (4) raise required resources including finance that may be needed to meet specific population needs in the community or quarter; and (5) Marshall the meeting of the community or quarter population needs.

➢ Helping the Community or Quarter Action Committee (CAC/QAC) to liaise with other population needs stakeholders (such as government departments, councils, businesses, churches, the media, research institutions, foundations and other civic organisations) to quickly address the population needs competently.

4. THE MILE 19 EXAMPLE

Mile 19 is a village located along the Tombel-Kumba Road, in the Kupe-Muaneguba Division of Cameroon. Its population of 586 grows at 2.8 percent per annum and is about 80 percent literate. The village has a primary school that is fast becoming a cultural hub serving ten other villages. But the growth and changing status of Mile 19 brings problems of its own that add to those that were there before and are yet to be solved. These include lack of education opportunities for all, inadequate access to safe drinking water, dust pollution especially in the dry season, insufficient hygiene and sanitation, income generation deficiencies, differing aims and commitments in the community, conflicts that arise, and inadequate organisational skills to address the issues with competence, peacefully. Development was so often disrupted, poorly planned and implemented, fuelling feelings of frustration and bitterness that sometimes grow superstition, spread falsehood, and erupt in violence between individuals, in homes, within and around the community.

EITD Research intervention in the village followed requests from community leaders. The initial (October 2006) purpose was to organise a retreat for the leaders with specific objectives of reflecting on issues facing the community, prioritising the problems and developing intervention mechanisms for them, increasing mutual trust and communication ability, helping to enthuse participation in village community life and improving living standards for all. These were later extended to cover a variety of follow-up activities, including execution of commissioned censuses and a variety of other services and support. The extending intervention is ongoing and involves close interactions with various community stakeholders and their leadership.

4.1 Intervention Hypotheses

The following theoretical positions inform the EITD Research interventions:

i) **Cameroon can live up to the mandate of its own Constitution.** This requires governance, and not just the state, to guarantee citizen rights and freedoms. These include rights to security, development, education, health, freedoms of association, expression, movement, etc.

ii) **Society can free itself from the scourge of corruption in democratic governance and economic development.** Citizens and their leaders have to be engaging one another increasingly, and continue discussing issues facing communities and the world, in genuine, transparent, interactive dialogues.

iii)   **Resource rich countries can do more than achieve MDGs.** Locally generated development processes and effective learning methodologies are critical to people empowerment in various tiers of governance forms. Compromises of wider interventions such as those in UN forums and other arenas must not be allowed to push poverty or its language down the throats of resource rich countries.

iv)   **Improving productivity, competitiveness, outreach and collaboration is vital to raising living standards for all, expeditiously and continually.** Available capacity must be enhanced and motivated to create wealth, increase income and dignify the human spirit in everybody.

4.2 Intervention Activity Areas and Strategies

Activity Area	Strategies	
1) **Increasing Poverty Eradicating Economic Growth** Orienting development activities towards meeting population needs expeditiously at the least possible costs in areas such as water, health, agriculture, education, environment, women, youth, commerce, sports, ICTs, etc.	i)	Providing information and advice on constraints and opportunities in the wider policy frameworks within which communities or quarters operate
	ii)	Developing policies, action plans and specific projects to address identified needs and project cycles.
	iii)	Capacity assistance to stakeholders to focus on activity objectives, policies and overcome prejudices.
2) **Securing Justice and Predictability in Society.** Ensuring that policies, laws or regulations and practices in local and wider governance are continually assessed critically to reveal their consistency in application or reform needs.	i)	Assistance in analyses and improvement of policies, laws or regulations and practices.
	ii)	Raising awareness on possibilities for dealing effectively with several issues locally.
	iii)	Building various stakeholder capacities and facilitating interaction between local and wider governance.
3) **Increasing Competitiveness in political and economic transactions** Promoting literacy, education, wealth creation, use of technology, other products and services, issue prioritisation and evidence based activity.	i)	Providing assistance in needs identification, project development, implementation and evaluation.
	ii)	Providing training, facilitating various stakeholder contacts and serving as clearinghouse for information, relevant products and services.
	iii)	Promoting excellence.
4) **Improving Responsiveness and Accountability** Encouraging citizens to take initiative and find things out for themselves by engaging one another, their various leaders and other local and wider governance stakeholders.	i)	Providing expert analyses on issues.
	ii)	Facilitating contacts, iterative interactions and communication between the various stakeholders
	iii)	Building stakeholder capacity on the range of issues.

5) **Ensuring Individual and Environmental Cleanliness and Health** Policy design, implementation and evaluation for cleanliness and health internally and externally regarding individuals, homes, the school, other institutions and surroundings.	i)	Issues analyses assistance and capacity building for various stakeholders in areas such as hygiene and sanitation, food and nutrition, apparel, diseases and germ theories, hospitalisation, etc.

4.3 Activity Design, Implementation and Evaluation

Activities in the foregoing areas include research; visits or study tours; retreats; policy, law or regulation and programme formulation, implementation and evaluation; facilitation of consultation or engagement processes; volunteering time and financial assistance; other seminars and follow-up meetings; and, training in specialist fields, advocacy and on-the-job.

Activity designs are flexible, but require stakeholders to be at the centre or the focus. They are encouraged and assisted to take initiative and act on their issues. This way, their ownership of the activities is cultivated and enhanced. It has been tempting for some stakeholders to wait on others, hoping that those they wait on will be in better positions to give true or fair accounts of the issues. However, many have been persuaded to lead when we make them realise that it is not always easy to know where or how shoes somebody is wearing pinch or hurt the person. They have been developing the habit of speaking for themselves and making sure they are heard.

The activities involve combinations of technical, political, economic and cultural responses to identified needs with the relevant speed, quality and collaborations or partnerships. These have ranged from initiatives in each of the foregoing five activity areas, to programmes that cut across them. Projects are designed and implemented following strategic relationships developed in research and consultations with collaborators including individuals and groups in the village, the community government school and the village community council. The community council is the lead agency in the village. It plays the triple role of being the central legislative, judicial and executive body in the village.

The activities use open or distance learning (ODL) tools extensively. These have included distance couriers, telephones, the press, radio, videos, television sets in closed circuit and the Internet to disseminate news and other correspondences. Although some of the services have not always been great, projects are on the way to improve them. Tasks in activities are allocated to various stakeholders as assignments with accomplishment and evaluation deadlines that are followed-up.

4.4 Oversight Provision and Follow-up

"Mile 19 Community Leadership Retreat Follow-up Meetings" serve to provide continuing intervention activity oversights and follow-up. They also show how the intervention model of EITD Research works in Mile 19. Following the "Leadership Retreat" EITD Research organised for Mile 19 community leaders in Kumba, October 10-13, 2006, the leaders returned with an Action Plan which they implemented with varying degrees of ease and hardships. They reported back to the community; sensitising community members with new thinking on the issues, reorganising and addressing problems based on agreed priorities in specific areas such as education, agriculture, health, water, drainage, hygiene and sanitation. A detailed census was commissioned and executed. Issue area committees were formed and increased their activity. Community demands for accountability and results became unrelenting. Need for additional resources surfaced.

Follow-up Meetings were conceived, in response, to help involve the whole community and mobilise the much needed internal and external resources. The first follow-up Meeting held in Mile 19, March 13-16, 2007. Its success mobilised preparations for the second follow-up Meeting, which held March 25-28, 2008 in Mile 19 (see www.m19.eitdr.org). During the Meeting, the community resolved to hold other follow-up Meetings triennially to help realised

development plans of the community in three years. **The next follow-up Meeting has thus been scheduled to hold from Tuesday July 29 to Friday August 1, 2008.**

The community is channelling the trust and support it is generating into programmes that are increasing employment, income and comfort in and around the village. Their increasing success is spurring others to emulate the achievements in other places. Contributions from the Mile 19 community provide core funding for the Meeting and several other activities in the village. The community, through its council organising committee, elaborates a budget for the Meeting which is debated and approved. Community members then raise the funds, monitor and evaluate its use by the council organising committee. The whole community has been mobilised and gets involved in organising and holding the follow-up Meetings.

4.5 Intervention Outcomes

Major improvements have come about in Mile 19 community awareness and confidence in its own abilities and possibilities. The village, through its community council, is elaborating and implementing a number of development projects to be completed "within the next three years. These include education initiatives for all, the building of school classrooms and toilets, a community hall and health centre, networks for mobile communication, television, and the Internet, drainage of rain water runoff, the paving and lighting of streets/paths, and the piping of save drinking water to every home in mile 19." (see Newsletter of September 2007 at: www.m19.eitdr.org/Mile%2019%20Community%20Newsletter%20September%202007.pdf).

Democratic governance is thriving in Mile 19 and the community is freeing itself transparently from corruption in its governance and economic development.

5. ISSUE DISCUSSION AND GOVERNANCE REFORM NEEDS

Can trends of poverty be arrested and reversed? Yes, expeditiously and continually in Cameroon. The country is not only resource rich. Its culture is responsive and dynamic as the example of Mile 19 shows. Citizen rights and freedoms depend on the quality of governance, and not just the state. Citizens own the state, and it falls to each and every citizen to help sort the state out when it is failing in its duties. But people must get the facts right, and cannot do so with corruption. Engaging one another in genuine dialogues help people to face facts, and free themselves from corruption. The Mile 19 example also shows how it is possible for communities and countries to do more than achieve MDGs. The development process drive is not only local. Its governance is also effective in learning. Although living standards have not been presented as rising in the Mile 19 example, allusions have been made to it in the increasing productivity, competitiveness, outreach and collaboration. The increasing human dignity in Mile 19 is empowering.

6. IMPACTS ON OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

i)   **For Enhancing Value in Locally Generated Development Processes:** Cameroon's revised Constitution (1996) requires local authorities to derive their powers from the people and promote development in their respective regions and localities. But numerous areas of responsibility remain poorly defined, to permit people to properly locate praise or blame for their plights as and when they feel the need to do so. As the Mile 19 example shows, people make efforts to table their needs and ensure the needs are met. They want to do better, and would welcome clear evidence based information to improve their decision making in governance.

ii)   **Increasing on-the-ground Learning Effectiveness Using ODL Tools:** As noted already, available education opportunities have been many and increasing in Cameroon. They have also been using ODL tools, increasingly. But the effected change has been stressing people up, exhausting them. So effective has the education been, people continue to evade or ignore their own issues in governance! For many, tackling problems collectively appears anathema! Vested interests have so easily been hijacking governance forms in homes, offices, communities, quarters and country. Whose issues have the available education and ODL methodologies been

addressing? Mile 19, for example, has a newsletter that is run by people who earn their living outside journalism, in farms, schools, etc. They would like to improve their writing skills, professionalise and sustain their newsletter, as well as become better at working and earning in their other fields within or around the village. Any proposals?

7. THANK YOU!