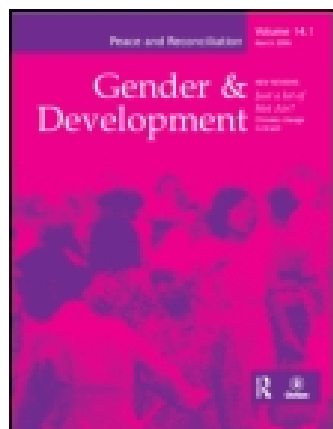


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Structural adjustment, women, and agriculture in Cameroon

Charles Fonchingong

This article appraises the impact of economic structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) on the agricultural activities of women's groups in Cameroon, and explores women's ways of coping with the decline in individual and family income and the loss of public services.

In Cameroon, agriculture is part of a livelihood strategy to safeguard a family's food security, health, and children's education. Since the introduction of SAPs in the late 1980s, some women are spending more time in agriculture to offset declining incomes and pay for a range of social services, growing crops for sale, barter, or subsistence, while others combine farming with entrepreneurial activities.

Structural adjustment in Cameroon

The Cameroonian economy recorded a high growth rate between 1975 and 1983. This successful economic performance — the result of a rise in investment, exports, and consumption — followed a period of intense development efforts, during which nearly all economic indicators were favourable. But from 1987, the economy contracted considerably, and progress towards improving the welfare of the population and meeting their basic needs more effectively was compromised.

SAPs were introduced to many African and Asian countries during the 1980s by the

World Bank and IMF; the aims were to salvage the deteriorating economies of these countries, through redefining the role of the state, reforming the civil service, and rehabilitating public enterprises and parastatals, in order to foster efficiency and stimulate growth. The process of structural adjustment was begun in 1987.¹ In 1994, the CFA franc (Cameroon's currency) was devalued; thereafter, public sector salaries were slashed, and a massive retrenchment of public service workers ensued. Currently, there are 180,000 public service workers, about 14 per cent of the total employed (Ministry of Economy and Finance 1999). UNICEF (1993) notes that women are the first to lose their jobs in periods of retrenchment, and that they become family breadwinners when their husbands are retrenched.

At the time of writing (August 1999) Cameroon is preparing to sign its third agreement with the IMF (a Stand-by Agreement of Loan Disbursement) which contains some modifications to the package of economic adjustment measures undertaken so far, and emphasises the stringent management of public expenditure. To date, Cameroon has carried out the following

measures as part of economic adjustment: controlling government expenditure through cutbacks on public spending; restructuring budgetary expenditure on technical services, especially agricultural research and extension; promotion of cash crop production; rationalising the selection of public investment projects; restructuring and increasing revenue through fiscal reforms; and settling the government's domestic arrears² (Ntangsi 1998). Government statistics put Cameroon's growth rate at 4 per cent (Ministry of Economy and Finance 1999), but this still remains to translate into standards of living.

The research

This article explores some of the various problems facing rural and urban women and their families under economic adjustment, and the role of women's groups in helping women to cope with the economic crisis which adjustment has caused. While rural households can try to stave off hunger and malnutrition through subsistence cultivation; in contrast, in urban areas, small parcels of land that used to be available for cultivation are being eaten up by urban expansion. The impact of the crisis and people's capacity to cope vary from one social group to another. However, overall, the study indicates that the groups most vulnerable during economic adjustment have been the urban poor, women, old people, children, and those living off their savings or on fixed incomes. This article will focus on women, and compare their experiences in rural and urban areas.

The article draws on research conducted between April and June 1999 into the role of 25 women's groups in both rural and urban areas, in Cameroon's north-west and south-west provinces. The research explored the aims and objectives of the groups, the impact of group activities on members, and any problems they had experienced as a result of structural adjustment. The groups

involved in the research were very different in structure: some had formal set-ups, with a president, secretary, and treasurer; these ranged in size between 10 and 20 members. Other groups without formal structures were particularly common in rural areas; these had between 30 and 40 members.

The primary method of research was a survey, but it was augmented by in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus-group discussions with group members, to discuss the benefits of belonging to a group. However, much vital information and data were gathered through conversations which gave respondents from very different backgrounds the opportunity to express themselves freely, and to discuss their experience of fighting the crisis.

Rural agriculture: Changes and challenges

For rural dwellers in Cameroon, agriculture is the backbone of livelihoods. Men used to engage in cash crop production, and women were chiefly concerned with food-crop production, but women reported that the economic crisis has changed the way they work with men. In Cameroon, as in other countries, structural adjustment measures aim to encourage the production of cash crops for export, to generate more foreign exchange and render the country better able to service its external debt payment. Crops grown for sale include bananas, palm oil, coffee, cocoa, and groundnuts. (Coffee is mostly cultivated in the north-west region of Cameroon, while cocoa is cultivated in some parts of the south-west province).

In comparison to the way of life before economic adjustment, women felt that there is now hardly any dividing line between men's and women's work in farming. There clear division of labour, with men concentrating on cash crops and women on food crops, which existed before the crisis has now changed. The distinction between cash crops and food crops has become blurred in

some cases; for example, some women and their husbands are involved in the cultivation of food crops which are exported to neighbouring countries like Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and the Central African Republic. Cash crops may be intercropped with subsistence crops on the same land. One response to economic pressures has been that everybody now works on the land to ensure survival.

However, there are tasks which are still commonly done by men, and food-crop production remains women's concern. Some respondents said that men tend to clear the fields and prepare the land for planting, and also help in planting, harvesting, and applying fertiliser. They also guard crops in areas where they are not safe. Women stated that they are still seen as responsible for feeding the family, and therefore have primary responsibility for subsistence crops.

Both cash and food crops may be grown on the family farm, and also on any other parcels of land which can be found for cultivation. Sometimes, cash crops may be intercropped with crops intended for subsistence. Commonly, though, cash crops are being grown on all available pieces of family land, and subsistence agriculture is pushed to small, and often remote, plots of marginal land. While the returns from these plots are small, it is time-consuming to cover the distance separating one such plot from the others. Most of the women interviewed were taking about four to six hours to trek from one farming plot to another. Women reported visiting each plot about three times a week during peak periods, and once a week in the slack season.

Some women who participated in the research thought that their continuing dependency on men for access to land hampered their agricultural efforts. Cameroon's pattern of land tenure is culturally determined: rights to use land are assigned by the tribal chief or village authority, and the male family member

makes the decisions on land-use. To lack clear title to land is to be dependent on those who control it, even if women's rights to use the land are recognised (Young 1993). Half a century ago, it was observed that in Cameroon, 'men own the land, women own the crops' (Goheen 1996). Most women involved in farming produce food both to provide for their families and for sale: rural and urban food supplies are dependent on the food they grow. In addition, land can serve as collateral to enable women to get credit and develop their agricultural and other activities. Constraints on women's food production are therefore likely to have a negative impact on the health and wellbeing of a great part of the population, a risk which should not be ignored (Visvanathan et al. 1997).

The women I interviewed felt that their workloads had increased tremendously in recent years. In rural areas, most women farm with basic tools, and have no access to agricultural inputs. In addition to cultivating crops, women tend animals. Many are now involved in income-generating activities outside the home, including selling food crops in local markets or, if they are close enough to urban areas or if transport is available, in urban markets. However, because urban dwellers' incomes have declined, they can only get low prices for their foodstuffs in urban markets.

Some women reported that their contribution to the household is now more visible. While men were formerly seen as family breadwinners, both sexes now share this role. This is reflected in greater control of income: more than 60 per cent of the women interviewed said that they now manage household income, usually because they are better managers and carers for the family. Research in other contexts argues that women are motivated principally by the needs of their children their households, whereas men are motivated to invest time and money outside the household, in male-dominated networks and business

partnerships (Rowlands 1995). However, women in my research complained that men squander the resources at their disposal on alcohol consumption, women, and social activities.

Agriculture and urban livelihoods

In urban areas, drops in household income and rising costs of living as a result of economic adjustment have forced women and men to eke out a living from agriculture. Food-stuffs eat into people's earnings, especially since the CFA devaluation of 1994. A higher proportion of household money is required to pay for medical care and education. Schools have high drop-out and low enrolment rates due to hardship resulting from economic adjustment. In the course of the research, I found that many girls were taking part in informal sector activities to supplement household income, rather than attending school.

Intercropping and share-cropping are common practices in urban agriculture due to scarcity of land. Organic waste is often used instead of fertiliser, but urban women who are able to afford agricultural inputs have relatively easy access to them. They may also be able to obtain credit from government and non-government sources, and from *Njangi* (rotating savings and credit) groups. Most of the women in urban areas said that the land they used for farming was rented, and their grip on it was temporary. Plots of land which have not yet been developed are offered for this purpose. An example is Nkwen, a rural area near the town of Bamenda. The Nkwen women's group farms vegetables on marginal lands rented from landowners who have unexplored land on the fringes of town. The women's group did not consider it sensible to invest heavily, since the group was not sure of retaining the piece of land during the next farming season. Landlords were compensated in cash or in kind.

In urban areas, members of women's groups listed many income-generating activities taken up in response to economic adjustment. Both sexes are commonly involved in informal entrepreneurial activities, but which activities are undertaken by women and men depends on class, occupation, age, education, and at times tribal affiliations, and women's trading activities tend to be on a smaller scale than those of men.

Some women stated that they are employed (as clerical workers, tailors, cleaners, hair-dressers, bar managers), but many also need to work in the informal sector to make ends meet. Petty trading of food and consumer goods is a key strategy for women: they buy foodstuffs (including cocoyams, plantains, beans, and vegetables) or stationery and other small goods from wholesalers ('buyam-sellams') and resell these, or cook and sell food at vantage points in town. Members of women's groups reported that most men (whether employed or not) are also involved in petty trading, street hawking, or selling a variety of goods as itinerant traders.

Coping with adjustment

Balancing the workload

Since women's lives straddle the reproductive and productive spheres, they absorb much of the pressure of structural adjustment. When women return from cultivating crops for sale, they continue farming on the homestead (Young 1993). Because they spend more time producing crops for sale, in informal sector activities, and providing family health-care, women are left with less time to carry out subsistence agriculture. Despite this, women reported putting in more hours on food-crop cultivation on their small land holdings, in combination with running the household, and collecting water and fuel, which adds to their laborious agricultural tasks.

In both urban and rural areas, women have been putting in more hours on food-crop cultivation since economic adjustment to compensate for the diminishing amount of available land and the lack of inputs. For urban women, who are also undertaking entrepreneurial activities, this has been a major drain on their time and energy. During 1998-99, land productivity in urban areas has gone from an average of about 40 per cent to 70 per cent, and in rural areas land productivity has risen from about 70 per cent to 85 per cent. In urban areas, the impact of reform measures can be seen by the increased number of women engaged in food-crop production to satisfy the practical needs of the household.

Some women said that the time they spend with their children is much reduced, with the consequence of reduced standards of care. Women who are breast-feeding children are faced with the most acute problems; in extreme cases, children have been abandoned. In most female-headed and some male-headed households, daughters take over the management of the family while the mother farms. Most members of women's groups said that their schedules were overloaded as they shuttle from the farms to the market and to meetings and other group activities, especially during the weekend. Women explained that they cope with the growing workload by foregoing recreation, reducing their hours of sleep and leisure time, and having fewer social outings. Since Sunday is a day set aside for rest, it is a good day for group meetings after church services in the mornings.

Counting the gains of group membership

All the women's groups felt that getting together and sharing resources was a good way of sustaining a livelihood in times of economic crisis, and of ensuring the survival of their families, although there were wide differences between the kinds of work they had embarked upon. Most women felt that their standard of living had fallen due to

the crisis, but was now improving. They felt that this was due to the exchange of information, knowledge, and other resources in the groups, and second, due to the fact that they had engaged in more agricultural activities than before the crisis. They saw this as a critical factor which had helped them meet the basic needs of their families.

Most women considered membership of their groups as a source of strength, helping them to stem the decline in living standards and in purchasing power. Some activities of rural and urban groups have been highlighted above: they are involved in collective farming and micro-processing and selling of food stuffs. For example, the Babungo women's group, the Batibo women's group and the Manyu women's group of north-west and south-west provinces process cassava and sweet potato into flour, soya beans into soya milk and other products. The Nkwen women's group, north-west province, is involved in shared micro-enterprises, including raising small ruminants and pigs, keeping poultry, and making textiles. Some of the groups make soap and detergents, and urban groups also focus on credit provision. Some groups buy necessities such as palm oil collectively and resell to their members at moderate prices.

In group meetings in both rural and urban areas, women commonly take part in savings schemes. During the week, women struggle to save money from their sales of produce for the meetings on Sunday. The schemes function on a 'thrift and loan' basis, where members save in rotation; savings are distributed via a ballot at the meeting, or according to the gravity of the problem faced by a member. Loans have a minimal interest charge, and are repaid after a specific period. In some groups, members get their savings at Christmas, when they need to buy extra commodities.

Meetings are also a forum for exchanging ideas about women's agricultural work, and discussing problems related to their

subsidiary activities like marketing and processing foodstuffs. Because women can no longer afford to buy imported grains and other food items due to their high prices, they have to convert what they produce for their own consumption. For example, soya bean is produced on a large scale and processed into milk, flour, and other products, for sale and for home consumption. Urban groups have an edge over rural groups in processing, since they are more likely to have access to improved technologies, and urban selling can occur on a daily basis, whereas in rural areas markets are normally held once a week.

The Kongadzem³ women's group

The Kongadzem group was set up by a few women in 1994 during the worst of the economic crisis, with the aim of improving the living conditions of rural women in the Bui division of Cameroon's north-west province. The first members recruited others, and the group focused on agriculture, although a few members were more interested in small business. By pooling their resources, women in the group have gained access to credit from several sources⁴, which they have used to purchase agricultural labour-saving devices, such as corn mills, mechanical pressers for processing garri⁵, cassava graters, oil pressers to extract oil from palm kernel, drying ovens, and wheel-barrows for transporting produce in remote areas.

Members of Kongadzem said that they had increased their food crop production as a result of collective farming and training visits organised through the group, which equipped them with skills in farming and livestock-rearing techniques. Like other women's groups studied, the members benefit from loans through the *Njangi* scheme. They rear livestock with the aim of fighting malnutrition in the community by augmenting protein intake. The first-born female offspring of an animal allocated to a group member is repossessed by the group, and given to another member.

Economic hardships are alleviated in several ways: for example, members receive training in book-keeping skills. Members contribute money to help others in financial need during occasions like 'cry-die' (rituals on the death of a close relative) and 'born-house' (rituals on the birth of a baby). These ritual activities are meant to cushion community members from pain and hardship, and to encourage members to forge ahead amid difficulties. Also worth noting is the policy of the 'trouble bank', which was a feature not only of Kongadzem, but of most other groups which participated in the research. The 'trouble bank' is meant to rescue members when they may have difficulty in meeting expenses, for example, in times of sickness. Women reported that they gain emotional strength from membership of the group, which inspires them to renew their efforts in order to sustain their families.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to shed light on the coping strategies adopted by women as a result of structural adjustment. Women's workload has increased since they are now farming for both cash and subsistence, using fragmented plots which are often distant from home, and yield poor returns. Land for food-crop cultivation has become increasingly scarce, and inputs have become increasingly unaffordable. The money which comes into the household from the sale of crops is insufficient to compensate for higher costs of living and social services. Women asserted that what money is available needs to be within their control, to ensure that it reaches the family.

Women in the third world now carry a double, even triple, burden of work as they cope with housework, child-care and subsistence food production, in addition to an expanding involvement in paid employment (Momsen 1991). In addition, women everywhere say that they work longer hours

than men, meeting responsibilities at home in addition to productive work outside.

How women cope with economic crisis is crucial to the success of development policies in the third world. In the 25 women's groups in this research, women have devised strategies to deal with the crisis, but they need the support of organisations which can offer them incentives in the form of affordable agricultural inputs, credit, and other vital resources that will create an enabling environment for them to operate in. Women in rural areas seem to be coping better than urban dwellers, since they have more food crops to sell. Pressure on land in peri-urban areas means that meeting subsistence needs is very difficult; employment is scarce, and the informal sector is overcrowded. Urban women involved in the study spoke of extreme cases where women and girls resort to prostitution; they also attributed a high degree of delinquency among boys and men to an inability to cope with life in this setting.

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Notes

- 1 To deal with its deteriorating finances, the government first launched an economic stabilisation programme in 1987 to restore a budgetary balance; a first agreement was signed with the IMF in 1988. A second agreement was approved in 1997.
- 2 Debts owed to Cameroonian citizens, especially suppliers and contractors.
- 3 'Love all' (in the Bansa language of Bui, north-west province of Cameroon).
- 4 The NSO Women's Cooperative Society; the Investment Fund for Communal and Agricultural Micro-projects (FIMAC), a loan scheme sponsored by the World Bank; the Association for Women's Information and Coordination Offices (AWICO), an NGO that facilitates loans to women's groups in the north-west province (known as the Women's Information and Coordination Forum, WICOF, in the south-west province).
- 5 Foodstuff made from cassava.

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