

## Expanding horizons: Women's voices in community-driven development in the Cameroon grasslands

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### Abstract

Communities are increasingly becoming development spaces where members are dynamic actors in fashioning issues of common interest. This paper explores women's efforts at building social capital for communitarian ventures in selected rural localities of the Cameroon grasslands. It is argued that effective participation in raising livelihoods and infrastructure provisioning is facilitated through women's social networks (*njangis*). The paper situates the gender concerns in community participation, rekindled through village development associations (VDAs) – crucial in needs identification, prioritization and execution of identified projects. Based on focused field studies in selected localities, it is established that due to their low social status, workloads and tight schedule, women remain on the sidelines of the leadership in VDAs. However, women's in-cash or in-kind contribution remains crucial to the successful implementation of projects. Enhancing female participation hinges on efforts at erasing cultural stereotypes that project women as domestic workers, improving literacy, increased access to productive resources especially land, direct support to women's agricultural activity and improved rural infrastructure (roads, water supply, and electricity) that is compromising women's participation and empowerment drive.

### Introduction

Many of the shortcomings of gender analysis have operated on the basis of over-simplistic assumptions. This as Cornwall (1998) notes can only be challenged when we look at the ways in which local people experience gender and other differences. In particular, there is minimal consideration of gender issues and inadequate involvement of women. The language and practice of 'participation' often obscures women's worlds, needs and contributions to development, making equitable participatory development an elusive goal (Guijt and Shah, 1998). Bamberger et al. (1995) note that good information should be obtained on gender roles, the constraints operating against women's participation through a combination of quantitative surveys and qualitative social assessments. Greater involvement of women and attention to gender-differentiated needs hold the promise of much more effective and equitable process of participatory development (Guijt and Shah, 1998). Community participation does not necessarily translate into women's participation (Masika with Baden, 1997).

The economic downturn that set in the late-1980s in Cameroon exacerbated the impoverishment of the masses and consequently, heightened the poverty

situation of most households. Women were worst off since they had to cushion their families following the cutbacks on social expenditure in key sectors like education, health and agriculture and the loss of public services (Fonchingong, 1999). The economic meltdown and other shortcomings served as a blessing in disguise as communities through village development associations (VDAs) are opting for greater revitalization of community development initiatives as the way out (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002). These self-reliant development efforts are being supplemented with handouts from local and international NGOs, which blossomed in the early-1990s against the backdrop of political and economic liberalisation in Cameroon (Fonjong, 2001).

The main strength of communities lies in their potential for collective action. Poor people may be relatively powerless as individuals, but not when they come together in communities. To become empowered, people need the political and economic space and time to associate and organise themselves to combat their deprivation (UNDP, 1998). Narayan-Parker (1995) notes that participation is a voluntary process by which people, including the disadvantaged (in income, gender, ethnicity, or education), influence or control the decisions that affect them. The essence of participation is

exercising voice and choice. In many rural communities as Moser (1987) notes, women are involved in planning and decision-making as well as in the implementation and management of community-initiated self-help development projects. This study delves into women's involvement in rural community development projects galvanised through VDAs – vehicles for inducing socio-economic changes in rural communities. It situates the gender dynamics in community development and X-rays the barriers faced by women in their communitarian drives.

### Theoretical framework and conceptual grounding

The concept of participation in community development has been of central concern to development commentators (Korten, 1980; Paul, 1987; Streeten, 1987; Ghai and Alcantara, 1990; Mayo, 1994; Bazlul, 1994; Miller, 1995; Craig, 1998; Botes and van Rensburg, 2000). Many have often assumed that the presence of women at community gatherings, alongside men, means that women and their issues are being included. This assumption completely ignores the dynamics of gender relations. Inequalities, oppressive social hierarchies and discrimination are often overlooked (Guijt and Shah, 1998) resulting in women and their specific (and differentiated) concerns becoming far excluded (Cornwall, 1999; Mosse, 1994).

Community-driven development is in tandem with the proponents of the endogenous approach to development. Shaw (1993, p. 114) averred that: 'it is development determined from within by the people of the society themselves; based on their own resources – human, physical and institutional... the ultimate aim of such a strategy is an improvement of both the quantitative and qualitative lifestyle of all members of the society'. Etzioni's (1996, p. 6) definition echoes that of Shaw when he argues that 'a good community is one of affect-laden relationships that often crisscross and reinforce one another, requires a commitment to a set of shared values, norms and meanings, a shared history, identity and culture and characterised by a relatively high level of responsiveness'.

Much of the developing world continues to wrestle with inadequate infrastructure, either non-existent or in a state of disrepair. Although the notion of community participation remains problematic, its potential in rallying existing communal resources to enhancing and sustaining community livelihoods in Cameroon cannot be disputed. Community participation as a development strategy has a very long and rich history in Africa in general and Cameroon in particular where formal community development is traceable to the expansion and growth of the credit union movement in Anglo-phone Provinces (Delancey, 1977), community education and the British colonial experience on community development (Kwo, 1984) and to government's shifting regional and community development plans (Yenshu,

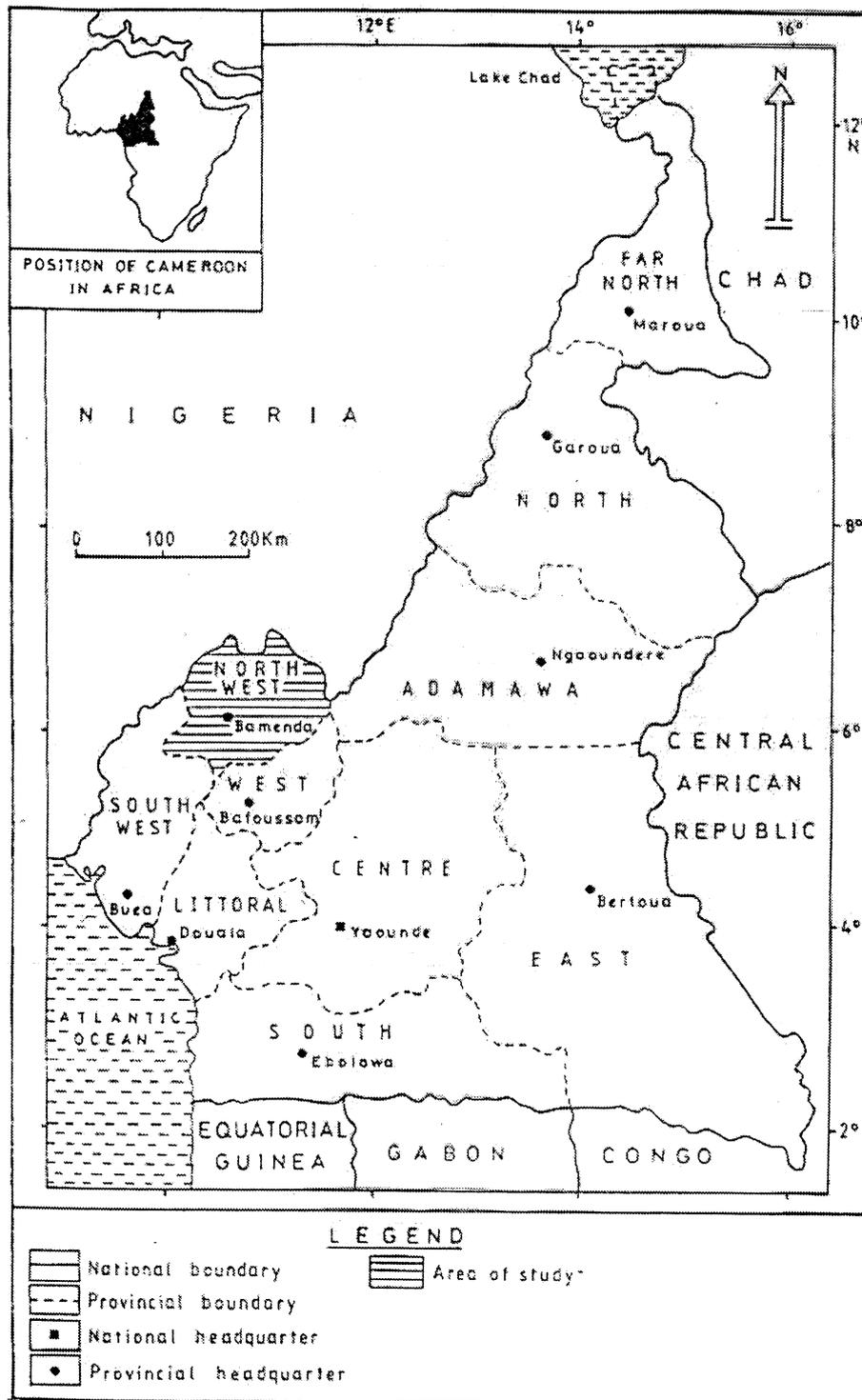
1998). The problem of resource scarcity that remains nightmarish accentuates the need for innovative, cost-saving and sustainable public service delivery strategies (Lammerink, 1998; Njoh, 2002). Drawing from the Mutengene and Bonadikombo self-help water supply projects, Njoh (2002, 2003) maps out the successes and constraints associated with both schemes. Amongst the constraints, he cites the paternalistic posture of authorities, prescriptive role of the State, embellishment of successes, selective participation, hard-issue bias, intra/inter-group conflicts, gate-keeping by leaders, excessive pressures for immediate results, and disinterest within the primary beneficiary community.

A more effective and engaged approach to understanding the dynamics of community participation would focus on the actions of women within social networks geared at community improvemental activities. Woolcock's (1998) Social integration framework is very relevant in this study. Social integration as conceived by Woolcock is an indicator of the degree to which community members provide one another with services, resources and opportunities for individual and collective advancement. If a community has too little social integration as Woolcock argues, it might result in low levels of trust among its members, which may prevent collective action. Conversely, excessive social integration might result in a community becoming overly protective of its members. This framework sheds light on the role and impact of social networks in Community development. Women's *Njangis* examined in the paper are social networks of reciprocity, mutual assistance and trust. Within communities, they foster community participation by building social capital and mobilizing members for community endeavours. The existence of *Njangis* or rotating credit associations have imbued men and women with a strong sense of organization in generating resources and committing them for social development activities that seeks to improve livelihoods (see Delancey, 1977; Ardener and Burman, 1995; Fonchingong, 1999).

It is within this background that this study seeks to engage with women's concerns, options and stakes in community development initiatives. Through women's *njangi* groups, they step in to address basic needs. The Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) meeting in Bangalore, India (1984) notes: 'if the benefits of development are to reach the most vulnerable members of the South, development must start by seeing the world from women's perspective'.

### Methodological issues of the study

The study was carried out in the North West Province of Cameroon, split into seven divisions namely: Bui, Boyo, Donga-Mantung, Mezam, Menchum, Momo and Njoketunja and 31 sub-divisions (Map 1). The population of Cameroon is approximately 16 million with high densities in urban areas like Yaounde, Douala and Maroua.



Map 1. Map of Cameroon locating the North West Province (area of study).

The North West is ranked fourth with a population of over a million and half inhabitants (North West Provincial Service of Statistics, 1987) and current demographic estimates still reflect the numerical strength of women. The Province harbours a huge number of poverty-stricken persons with a very high rural population of approximately a million. Since poverty in Cameroon remains predominantly rural, the Province is ranked third with 365,352 estimated numbers of poor, out of the 10 Provinces of Cameroon (World Bank, 1995). The

region under study is an interesting one given the long history of communal development efforts under the tutelage of neo-traditional authorities in collaboration with VDAs that are firmly rooted.

In terms of land surface, it covers an area of 17,409 km<sup>2</sup>, about 3.7% of Cameroon's total surface area. The average population density of the Province stands at 99.12 per km<sup>2</sup> (North West Provincial Service of Statistics, 1987). The region under study is referred to in ethnographic literature as the Bamenda grasslands

given the predominance of savannah vegetation. It shares similar geographic, cultural and linguistic features with the neighbouring West Province of Cameroon. Located within the western highlands of Cameroon, it is endowed with natural geographic features like lakes, rivers, springs and man-made reservoirs. Due to the hilly topography, most rural areas are enclaved, especially, during the wet season with most roads impassable from mid-March to mid-November.

Agriculture remains the mainstay of the economy and engages the energies of both men and women. The sector accounts for the preponderant share of the GDP and is the number one income-generating sector. Against this backdrop, men and women alike have brought their collective energies to bear on development projects. However, when it comes to assessing the role of women in the development process of the Province, such role is usually downplayed and quite often subsumed under the more dominant male folk. It is also instructive that because of certain cultural and traditional barriers, the potentials of women have remain latent and consequently, untapped hindering and, in some cases, stunting the development process in most rural communities of the region.

Women survive on subsistence agriculture which is the life wire in the economy of the Province. Through heuristic, women have come to master the agricultural sector. For instance, local women farmers know that a rich harvest is usually contingent upon strict adherence to the farming calendar. This explains partially why women's participation in community development endeavours is hampered during peak periods in the farming calendar. Though becoming blurred, traditionally, there is a visible sex-based division of labour. For instance, it is the role of the men to clear the farms while the women do the tilling, planting, weeding and harvesting. To obviate the tedium usually associated with non-mechanized agriculture, the women of the Province have constituted themselves in working groups. These groups consist of women within the same peer group who are either of the same kindred or belong to the same social organisations. Their activities cover the entire farming process, especially, the very tasking ones.

Based on the geographical realities of the Province and the fact that agriculture remains the mainstay of most inhabitants, it is incumbent to find out the coping strategies put in place to mitigate the high level of impoverishment. Data collection and analysis for the study are based on specific objectives and guiding hypotheses. The objectives were:

- (1) to find out the participation of women in community development endeavours in selected localities of the North West Province;
- (2) to examine the structure and roles of women's *njangi* groups in community development initiatives;
- (3) to determine the obstacles to women's participation and empowerment in local development.

The guiding hypotheses were:

- The economic downturn has fostered greater female participation in community development endeavours through women's groups and social networks.
- Respect for the deeply male entrenched traditions of the grasslands affects women's participation in top leadership of community structures.
- Projects executed translate in an improvement in the welfare situation of women, their families and not women's empowerment per se.

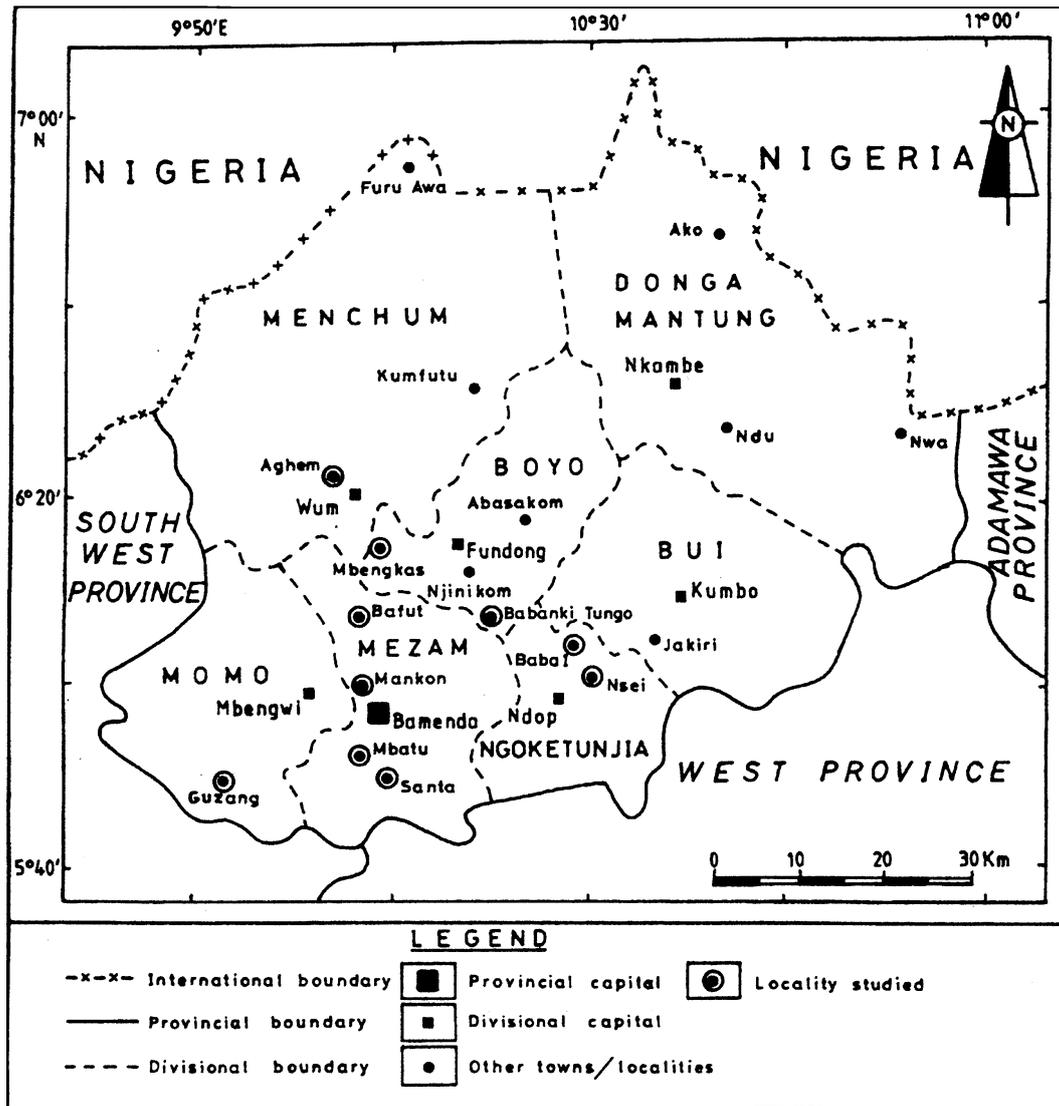
The first hypothesis measured the fall-outs of the loss of public services on women's group mobilization efforts while the second sought to associate these efforts against the backdrop of male hegemony still prevalent in the region. The third hypothesis established the connection between women's community development initiatives and its impact on livelihoods.

Field work was carried out between November and January 2004. The female folk who constituted the bulk of the respondents were randomly selected from various localities and village development committees in the study sites. They were both interviewed on individual and collective basis. The localities studied cover a geographical spread of 6 out of the 7 Divisions that make up the administrative geography of the Province. The VDAs studied come from Mezam, Menchum, Boyo, Bui, Ngoketunjia and Donga-Mantung Divisions of the Province (Table 1 and Map 2).

The analysis is based on a common questionnaire and a sample interview guide administered in the study sites. The chiefs, notables, and local community leaders, women's groups, constituted important sources of

Table 1. VDAs studied, locality/village and division.

Studied VDA	Locality/village	Division
Bafut Development Majong	Bafut	Mezam
Mbatu Cultural and Development Association	Mbatu	Mezam
Santa Akum Development Association	Santa	Mezam
Bawum Cultural and Development Association	Wum	Menchum
Kumfutu Development Committee	Kumfutu	Menchum
Njinikom Area Development Association	Njinikom	Boyo
Abasakom Area Development Association	Belo	Boyo
Tatum Development Association	Tatum	Bui
Baba I Development and Cultural Association	Baba	Ngoketunjia
Nsei Union	Bamessing	Ngoketunjia
Ndu, Lower Mbot, Binka	Ndu, Lower Mbot and Binka	Donga-Mantung



Map 2. Bamenda Grasslands showing localities studied.

primary data and their viewpoints were sought on executed and ongoing community projects. The viewpoints of community members were elicited on their participation in community development endeavours and, most especially, the involvement of the female folk. Other issues of concern were: the input of women from the conception to the sustainability of projects; gender roles and gender-based constraints in project execution, contributions/levies for community projects (in-cash and in-kind); assistance from governmental, non-governmental and other development agencies and form; strategies at enhancing female participation in community development activities.

Focus group discussions were held with some women's *njangi* groups and women leaders in the VDAs on projects executed, effects on women's livelihoods and empowerment, role of elite women, how women's groups negotiate cultural and other constraints. The data collected have been represented both qualitatively and quantitatively and analysed in line with the research objectives and hypotheses. Spatial phenomena are illustrated by the use of maps and comparative discus-

sions are examined within the framework of relevant secondary data.

#### Situating women's voices in communitarian ventures

Women play very vital roles in community development projects and programmes. Within the wider renewal of associational activity in the context of economic and political liberalisation in Cameroon in the early-1990s, there is a resurgence of common initiative groups and women's *njangi* groups, founded on regular participation, ongoing social relationships, community sanctions and trust (Goheen, 1995, my emphasis). Misunderstanding or ignoring women's needs not only affects the women themselves but also, quite obviously, has a negative impact on the immediate family and the wider community (Guijt and Shah, 1998).

Community-based action remains a powerful and essential vehicle for development, as long as it addresses gender and other dimensions of social difference explicitly (Guijt and Shah, 1998). The gist of the paper is

to situate women's voices in terms of their involvement, dynamics and barriers in access to resources, resource mobilisation, rapport with men folk, the realities and particularities of women's lives. Women are involved in communitarian ventures at individual and collective levels. Their input into project execution consists of meeting up with the stipulated levy, preparing food for workers, supplying of unskilled labour, transportation of local materials like sand and in some cases stones, fetching water, cleaning around the project sites. In most of the localities studied, women and men who cannot contribute financially do so in kind by grouping themselves in the various quarters. They are expected to put in extra hours in manual work. In the case of Nsei village, women who do not meet up with their financial commitment, do so in kind by offering foodstuffs commensurate to their contribution. The case of Tatum that is remarkable for livestock production is different. In addition to foodstuffs (mostly maize, beans), women and men contribute through small ruminants (goats, pigs, fowls) that are sold during exhibitions at general assemblies. Other women indicated that they provided cooked food to workers once every week while the men provide a specified quantity of locally produced palm wine. However, the increased involvement of women in the construction phases places additional burdens on women. In self-help housing projects, or public works schemes (Wells, 1990) women are often relegated to 'secondary chores' such as carrying water, wetting bricks, mixing mortar, or tidying verges.

Worthy of note are contributions from elite women (considered to be women who occupy high positions within the public service or who are big business operators residing out of the village). This is the case of the Bafut Elite women's association that has offered farm tools and grants in aid to women's groups like the *Nkokoh*, *Bafut women for Better life*, *Nchewnchew* groups that are involved in farming, rearing of animals, bulk buying and retailing. The Mbatu women's cooperative group saw the light of the day with assistance from elite women in the likes of Anna Nforcha and Lucy Vubang Chumbow. These women's networks or village associations are essential components of the community development process and are likened to women's organisations under the Aga Khan Rural Support Programme in Gujarat State in India. Rural communities are empowered particularly women are supported with concrete small projects (credit schemes, keeping group accounts and registers, improved technologies to reduce women's drudgery and workload; Bilgi, 1998).

At general assemblies, women are at the forefront of mobilisation. They prepare food to entertain members and other guests. They also prepare songs and traditional dances that constitute the animation aspect of the occasion. In the villages I visited, women during the preparatory phase are involved in sensitization of their lot and also men on the importance of participation. The women's groups become very central mechanisms of mobilisation. Women also constitute themselves into

*njangi* groups and tackle such communal tasks as keeping the village streets and market clean. There are also designated periods for women to clean up the *Fon's* palace in some localities. The *Fon* is the traditional head of the village and his rulership is hereditary. In the grasslands of Cameroon, they are highly revered and venerated. The example of Nsei village is edifying since one of the executed projects is the purchase of a car for the *Fon* with the financial contribution of women and men. Under the ambit of the Santa Akum' Development Association (SADA), the *Akonne* women's group rallies members every first Wednesday of the month for clean-up campaigns.

The *njangi* groups usually have internal regulations and formal structures made up of a President, Vice-President, General Secretary, Financial Secretary, Treasurer, Publicity Secretary and in some cases Technical Advisers (usually an elderly person) or a coordinator. Membership per group ranges from 15 to 45 members averagely and may be large like the *Takabong* women's group (Santa Akum) that has a membership of 103. In all the groups, new members are recruited annually through payment of a registration fee that ranges from 500 to 5000 FRS CFA in all the localities with the term of office spanning 1–2 years.

Depending on the nature of its creation, most *njangi* groups carry out a gamut of activities that touch on the livelihood of members. Whether cultural, social and thrift and loan societies, their major projects bother on collective farming, provision of 'soft' loans, collective marketing and sharing of social dilemmas (Fonchingong, 1999). At the individual level, they also ensure that every woman has a farm where she does cultivation and marketing of food crops. Collectively, members engage in cooperative farming and the operation of group accounts. They also exhibit foodstuffs and other goods at agricultural shows organised by the Ministry of Women's Affairs and during international events like the World Food day celebrations where prizes are won. The women's groups in the past have won prizes like wheelbarrows, hoes, push trucks and cash prizes to boost their farming activities. In addition, when the produce is sold off, the returns are ploughed back into the group's *njangi* account. Part of the returns can also serve group members in times of trouble (payment for children's schooling, health care, birth and death commemorations etc.). The specific case of the *Kitchen njangi* in Nsei Village departs from the mainstream. It enables both, married and unmarried women to purchase household equipment, to pay for children's schooling and to address the basic health needs of the women and their families. Widowed women are also offered some form of social security through the saving and lending schemes. Members also make rounds during 'born-house' (birth) celebrations.

With the execution of specific projects and coupled with the gestures by women's networks and associations, the effects on livelihood of most women have changed for the better though it is difficult to measure the real

impact. In Santa Akum, the corn mill project has reduced women's financial burden. Members of the *njangi* do not pay user fees.

Most women I interviewed indicate that community and group initiatives were very helpful in tackling infra-structural problems. The case of pipe-borne water was outstanding as it reduced the drudgery and strain of trekking for long distances to fetch water. In all the localities, water projects take prime place on the development agenda with maintenance and management committees in place. The building of churches as the interviewees testified has helped the moralisation drive as some Christians renounce cultural practices like witchcraft, worshipping of oracles and a rethink of dehumanising cultural practices like widowhood and Levi racy. With the building of community halls, most indigenes get together for social events like births, deaths, marriages etc. Some of the halls are serving as adult literacy training centres for women, which have increased the literacy rate. The improvement of some farm-to-market roads has facilitated the rapid evacuation of foodstuffs to local and village markets. In Nsei Village, the dam project has made irrigated water available to the women's rice fields and enhanced the cultivation of all season vegetables (huckleberry), very vital for the economy of the locale. It has also improved the income of women farmers. Women's groups like the *Viwo* have taken the opportunity to cultivate garlics, onions, leeks, percy and other condiments.

In some localities, women's *njangi* groups get resource persons to teach their lot on sanitation and environmental hygiene practices, health-related issues and also on the production of such items as soap, oil and some basic household needs that target the practical gender needs of the family. This is aimed at providing useful sidelines to them and also in fighting poverty. A corollary of the above-mentioned women's activities is that they are able not only to meet their financial levies and contributions to village development projects but also to physically take part in such projects. In Mbatu locality, the execution of the market project at *Ndah quarter*, the construction of the community hall and three primary schools saw the input of women's groups like the *Amoteh* (where ideas are brought together) and the Njimafor grassroots women farming group, which were very instrumental in financial contributions and organised manual work. According to Uphoff (1985), participation assures equality of access to facilities while the World Bank (1995) argues that it fosters individual and community empowerment, management and organizational skills within the community.

Table 2 shows the levying scheme for women and men in community development endeavours. While most levies are statutory and contributed annually, the levy may vary depending on the magnitude of the project(s) to be executed. It should be noted that those contributions in cash do not exclude contributions in kind that usually involve physical labour on selected days in the community calendar of operations or on traditional rest days (country Sunday). External elite

Table 2. Financial contribution towards community development projects in the localities studied.

Locality/VDA	Women	Men
Bafut Development Manjong	500	1000
Mbatu Cultural and development Association	1000	2000
Santa Akum Development Association	500	1000
Bawum Cultural and Development Association	1000	2000
Kumfutu Development Committee	2000	5000
Njinikom Area Development Association	250	500
Abasakom Area and Development Association	500	1000
Tatum Development Association	500	1000
Baba I Development and Cultural Association	500	1000
Nsei Union	3000	6000
Ndu, Lower Mbot, Binka	1000	2000

Source: Fieldwork (2004). US\$1 = Ranges from 500–650 FRS CFA.

usually contribute higher amounts in terms of cash and materials and, in some cases, they cover a substantial proportion of the financial cost of a specific project.

It is discernible from Table 3 that men dominate in most VDAs consequent upon the numerical strength of the executive positions they hold. It was also noticeable that men usually hold the strategic positions like the offices of the President, Secretary, Financial Secretary, Auditors while women feature prominently in portfolios like Vice-President, Vice-Secretary, Publicity and Organising Secretary and in other cases, the position of Treasurer is shared. Some VDAs were managed by caretaker/project committees that were very active during the implementation phase of projects. Since the inception of most of the VDAs, most women have neither contested nor held the post of President. In the case of Nsei village (Ngoketunjia Division), there is an executive position (Women's Affairs) strictly held by women. It is impressive to note that with the Tatum Development Association, the National secretary is female and the treasurer of the water maintenance committee is female while with the Mbatu cultural and development association, there is a lady President who acts as Vice-President during general assemblies. This is also the case with the Bafut Majong where the *Ma Ndabekum* acts as lady President at general assemblies.

Some of the VDAs have created parallel structures strictly for women. This is the case with the Alatening Women's Cultural and Development Association (AWCDA) and Abasakom Area Development Association (ABADU) that has a women's wing with its own executive. However, during major decision-making in the umbrella association, the President of the Women's wing is always in attendance as one of the Zonal Presidents. Also, during the implementation phases of most projects, several committees and sub committees are

Table 3. Leadership positions held by women and men in selected VDAs.

VDA/locality	Women		Men	
	No.	%	No.	%
Bafut Development Majong	2	33.3	4	66.7
Mbatu Cultural and Development Association	2	33.3	4	66.7
Bawum Cultural & Development Association	4	28.5	10	71.5
Kumfutu Development Committee	1	20	4	80
Tatum Development Association	4	40	6	60
Baba I Development and Cultural Association	1	10	9	90
Nsei Union	3	30	7	70
Ndu	2	20	8	80
Lower Mbot	2	20	8	80
Binka	1	12.5	7	87.5

Source: Fieldwork (2004).

Table 4. Executed and ongoing community projects in the localities studied.

VDA/locality	Executed and ongoing projects
Bafut	District hospital, schools, water project, farm to market roads, girls' vocational school, ceremonial ground at the palace, fencing of Fon's palace
Mbatu	Catholic church, community hall, primary school, rural roads, village market
Bawum	Pipe-borne water, bridges, palace hall, chief's rest house, road maintenance, primary school, electricity supply
Santa Akum	Water project, community hall
Kumfutu	Pipe-borne water, primary school building
Njinikom	Maintenance of roads, community primary school, women's social centre, pipe-borne water, scholarship scheme for secondary and university students, environmental hygiene
Abasakom	Support to village health centre, bridges, grinding mill, school classrooms, community hall
Tatum	Bridges, market stalls, cooperative society
Baba I	Village roads, health centre, primary school building, pipe-borne water, community hall
Nsei Union	Community hall, pipe-borne water, bridges, palace road, dam project, purchase of Fon's car
Ndu, Lower Mbot and Binka	Pipe-borne water, road maintenance, bridges and culverts, pumping station for water supply, bee farming barns

Source: Fieldwork (2004).

created such as Finance, Health, Fundraising, Decoration, Dance and Entertainment, Publicity and Communication, Projects etc. Women usually dominate in sub-committees like fundraising, decoration, dance and entertainment, which hinges on social mobilisation efforts. The implementation of most projects is usually done after a general congress or general assembly, which may be hosted, by the mother branch or a chosen zone. At this stage, both men and women's representatives are present to take stock of executed projects and ongoing activities. It is also a veritable forum to chart the way forward in terms of brainstorming on future development projects. Issues like levying scheme, timing of projects, input of men and women in terms of contributions in kind take centre stage.

It is noteworthy that some projects like pipe-borne water, health centres, community halls etc. stretch over a period of 5–10 years averagely depending on the contributions from the community, and other branches, chapters or zones of the Association. It is the case that the principle of citizen participation is hinged on local people taking part in the planning, execution, utilization and sustainability of the infrastructure designed to improve their welfare. It is such participation that gives

community members some sense of pride and ownership of the facilities acquired through self-help efforts. When indigenes in the localities studied refer to such accomplished projects as our school, our health centre, our community hall, our pipe-borne water, there is a strong sense of attachment to the values of community development, despite the long periods of execution of some projects.

#### Factors hampering women's participation

Predicting the impact of this infrastructure on women and men requires a close understanding of the details of their activities, opportunities and constraints (World Bank, 1994). The contribution of women to community development initiatives is beset with a litany of constraints. From the localities studied, the obstacles are near similar; they range from financial difficulties, poor roads and unfriendly topography to the subordinate position as a result of their unstrategic representation in executive bodies of village development committees. Also, the limited access to productive resources especially land leads to greater dependency on men; time

constraints as a consequence of their triple roles, vulnerable health, low level of education leading to incapacity to hold key leadership positions; productivity problems associated with poor marketing channels, financial malfeasance and siphoning off funds leading to apathy and disenchantment.

Table 5 shows women's daily activity profile and over-stretched schedule. This is common in typically female headed households where the husband is absent. It should be noted that during the peak agricultural season, these activities span Monday to Friday and women are free from farm work on Saturdays and Sundays, weekly market days in rural areas (for sales of farm products and for trade and barter) and during traditional holidays (Country Sunday). Due to the fragmented farming plots, women have to carry out their cultivation on several small landholdings that necessitates long and laborious treks. In urban areas, women are mostly free on Saturdays, usually set aside for market transactions. However, during the slack season, women might visit their farms 2 or 3 days in a week.

From the daily activity profile above, it is evident that women's workloads can be a constraining factor to their effective participation in VDAs. From the focus group discussions I held, it was discernible that the women devote most of their time to farm work and the operations are very vital for family sustenance. Male agriculturalists are equally busy during the week with free periods in the early morning and late evening when women are involved in housework and other chores. In a study of the gender-differentiated impact of village-level micro-hydro technology in Sri Lanka, Dhanapala (1995) found that institutional problems and conflicts, leadership styles and attitudes to women, the economic role and activities of women and lack of household support in subsistence activities were some of the factors hindering women's participation in infrastructure projects.

Based on the sampled population, about 85% of the women identified low levels of education as a major handicap. This affected their participation in village

Table 5. Typical women's daily activity profile in the localities studied.

Waking up	5:00 am
Domestic chores (cleaning, cooking, washing etc.)	5–6:00 am
Fetching morning water (in most cases, assisted by children)	6–6:30 am
Feeding of small ruminants (rabbits, pigs, goats, fowls)	6:30–7:30 am
Off to farm or cultivable plot	7:30 am
Farm work (varies depending on peak or slack season)	10:00 am–4:30 pm
Fetching fuel wood	4:30–5:30 pm
Trekking back home	6:00–7:00 pm
Preparing evening meal	7:00–8:00 pm
Other household chores (child care, washing, livestock care)	8:00–9:30 pm
Off to bed	10:00–11:00 pm

development committees as they could not vie for positions on the grounds of inferiority complex and lack of self-confidence. As seen in Table 3, most of the strategic executive positions are held by men and women could only grapple with positions such as Organising/Social secretaries, Publicity Secretary, Vice-Secretary and in rare cases, Treasurers. Since men have more time on their sleeves, the educational base and financial means they are favourably predisposed to holding strategic positions. Those held by women reflect women's capacity to mobilise community members during the execution phase of community projects. Also, due to women's low education, they do not effectively participate in the planning and sustainability of projects that require some technical input. Where community participation is seen as formal process (e.g., involving water committees or NGO facilitation) this can lead to the exclusion of women, who may have dominated less formal, pre-existing networks, as Cottam (1997) found in low-income areas of Lusaka, Zambia.

Women also decried the absence of health centres and dispensaries. Where these facilities exist, for the most part, there are hardly competent medical staffs coupled with the visible dearth of essential drugs and other logistics. In Nsei Village, for instance, there is only a clinic that serves a population of about 14,000 people. The State used to provide subsidies for farmers in the form of farm implements and fertilizers, construct Schools and health centres, rehabilitate feeder roads, provide essential drugs and deploy medical personnel to rural localities. This is no longer the case with the implementation of SAP as interviewees in the study sites testified. Due to women's high involvement in agricultural activities that are very laborious, they end up suffering from ailments that keep them off the farms and other community development ventures. This in part, explains the irregular attendance at meetings. Because of their vulnerable health, childbearing role and heavy workload, women's health status is weak and affects their participation in community development. As attested by some of the respondents, women's predicament is worsened by rampant cases of domestic violence (wife battery) and weak reproductive rights, which do not permit the women to influence decisions on family size.

Women's inability to own or inherit land is a major handicap. Since they rely on rented land, they cannot invest heavily because they are not sure of tenureship, during the next farming season. Added to this is the overall imbalance in the division of labour in community projects that is skewed to project male interest. Most community activities scheduled during peak periods of the agricultural season record very low female participation consequent upon their full engagement with farm work.

The deeply male entrenched traditions of the Cameroon grasslands relegate women to a subordinate position. They are mostly regarded as domestic servants and housewives. Due to the high rate of illiteracy within their ranks, most women do not deem themselves fit to

compete with the men on equal footing, especially, in the management of community development activities. The women I interviewed indicated that since the men contribute substantially more in terms of finance, they have the edge in decision-making and implementation of projects. As seen from the levying scheme, the amount contributed by men is a doubling of women's share. Most women are entrapped in the false belief that as a consequence men should have a greater say in community affairs.

In the execution phase of community projects, the gendered pattern is also reflected. Women are mostly involved in collecting sand, fetching water, collecting laterite, preparing food while the men handle the more energetic and strenuous operations of excavating and cracking stones, transportation of sand and stones, moulding of blocks, digging and felling of trees, building construction and other engineering works. These activities reinforce the male cultural stereotype of breadwinner and family head while women are projected in traditional roles like cooking and nurturing. These stereotypes are transferred to the management structures in the VDAs leaving women subordinated and marginalized. This notion, therefore, easily translates into men's dominance within executive positions and accounts for women's underrepresentation in VDAs.

Some VDAs face trying times and are threatened with dissolution when there is misappropriation of funds. There have been reported cases of embezzlement of funds leading to apathy. This has created some friction and antagonistic camps in VDAs. The executives of NADA, BANDECA and Bafut Development Manjong have had misgivings over the utilization of funds for the execution of some projects. To arrest the situation, suspected members are audited and those culpable of mismanagement are voted out of office or new financial committees are put in place.

In spite of the obvious tedium associated with agriculture occasioned by the absence of labour-saving technology, women in the study areas intimated that they still have to contend with trekking for considerable distances to their farms. More still, the farms to market roads are in a sorry state affecting the evacuation of crops from the fields. As a consequence, the sole means of transportation is by head portage with its attendant effects on freight, health and time. This forestalls the optimal participation of women in community development activities. Constraints on women's food production are likely to have a negative impact on the health and well-being of a greater part of the population, a risk which should not be ignored (Visvanathan et al., 1997). Women grow most of the food in the Province and sustain the rural and urban populations through their 'food baskets'. In the face of these commendable efforts, women cultivators are faced with the perennial problem of farmer–grazier conflicts that affects women's productivity. Some development agencies and NGOs are stepping in to address some of these constraints.

### Supplementing women's grassroots initiatives

The retreat of the State in its efforts at infrastructural provisioning has exacerbated the already parlous scenarios of the rural areas. Some development agencies and NGOs are attempting to fill the gaps left by State inaction. They target vulnerable groups especially women in rural communities. These organisations are seeking new ways of tackling poverty by implementing small-scale grassroots projects that put women at the centre stage. PLAN International has been very instrumental in addressing the health needs of mothers and infants. Pregnant women in the Nsei Village indicated that they were assisted with mosquito nets and some essential drugs. Also, the pupils and students from the ages of 4 to 15 benefited from the supply of essential textbooks and a renovation of school buildings with emphasis on pit latrines to improve sanitation.

The Swiss Association for Development (HELVETAS) emphasizes the supply of water to rural communities to check women's drudgery, especially, in the long treks to fetch water (HELVETAS, 1989). Working in consonance with the communities, they have undertaken pipe-borne water schemes with a coverage rate of about 55% in the Province. Women have also been trained to be members of water management committees. Some women are members of water management committees in some of the localities studied. The World Bank (1994) report recognises the capacity of NGOs to reach the poor and to involve beneficiaries as participants in development. They have acknowledged their flexible and innovative nature and their ability to enhance the capacity of local institutions.

Heifer Project International (HPI) is leaving no stone unturned as concerns the socioeconomic uplift of women's agricultural groups. They undertake training, provide technical assistance on animal husbandry, integrated and sustainable agriculture, nutrition education, marketing strategies and group and project management. Through their livestock project 'Passing on the Gift' women and men farmers have benefited from the distribution of very resistant and productive breeds of goats, pigs, chicken, rabbits and cattle in kind. These activities are enhanced through livestock placement and the gift monitoring to ensure that the paying back process with the first female offspring is attained. Most of the respondents testified that they raise their levy for community projects from their economic and entrepreneurial activities. Also, the dropping from the animals is transferred as manure to nourish their collective farming plots. From the yields and returns, they can embark on a community development projects like the roofing of school buildings, building of storage warehouses, farmer cooperative unions, buying of farm inputs like seeds, fertilizer, and the hiring of land for group farming.

Village development associations (VDAs) like the Bafut development Manjong have benefited from the largesse of PLAN International through the renovation of several schools in the village and the construction of

pit latrines. The American Ambassador's aid programme resulted in the construction of a fence round the Bafut palace which is a great tourist destination in the Province permitting the women to sell local crafts, foodstuffs and other goods. The Canadian embassy contributed immensely to the realisation of the *Nchum* and *Nforya* electricity projects. More rewarding is assistance for the creation of empowerment centres in the Bafut locality. Examples are the Girls' vocational school *Mambu* and the Homemaking centre at *Agyati*. Women and girls are being offered various types of vocational training on knitting, sewing, home craft, tailoring, small business management etc., which enables them to become self-reliant and self-employed. These efforts are short lived given the harsh economic climate that does not permit sustainability.

### Stepping-up women's participation and empowerment

Meeting the challenge of equitable participatory development means integrating gender awareness into practice (Guijt and Shah, 1998). Empowerment should consider women's strategic needs. Such needs arise out of their relatively subordinate position and require a radical transformation of interpersonal relations between women and men 'so that women have greater power over their own lives and men have less power over women's lives' (Kabeer, 1995). Most of the women in the study area operate a very tight schedule. Apart from their normal household duties, the women must fetch water, at times several kilometres away from home. This same process holds true for fuel wood. All these have a severe limiting impact on the amount of time women can participate in community endeavours.

Given the frequency of childbearing and the burdening schedule of women, their health is rendered vulnerable. The lack of women's reproductive rights and unplanned family formation take a negative toll on their productivity. Their labour is most often not rewarded and quite often too, they dispose their hard earnings for the well-being of the family. The inability to own land or inherit property has severely reduced women's capacity to be productive. Property, especially, land which is considered universal collateral is usually registered in a man's name. In some communities, there are customary laws prohibiting women from owning or selling land. Also, males by customary law have the monopoly to inherit from their father whereas in the case of the female, she must be unmarried to benefit same.

If empowerment involves increasing people's capacity to transform their lives, if it is more than inviting people to partake in needs assessment or a decision-making process (Young, 1993; Slocum and Thomas-Slayter, 1995; Guijt and Shah, 1998), then the women in the localities studied are yet to get to centre stage. The projects executed touch on welfare that does not translate into women's empowerment considering the cultural, patriarchal, and structural constraints they face in

their communities. The concept of participatory development and the interventions of NGOs, other development agencies have come under severe criticism recently, partly on the grounds that each appears to 'tyrannize' development debates without sufficient evidence that either has actually empowered poor and marginal peoples (Cooke and Kothari, 2001).

The literacy level among women is abysmally low and this unfortunate situation is ascribable to limited access of women to educational facilities occasioned by tradition and the lame argument that education for the female child is an avoidable leakage in the economy of the family. The argument on which this unfortunate situation is anchored is that once a woman is given out for marriage, she automatically leaves the family. Any investment on her is, therefore, tantamount to waste. Therefore, the most some parents do is to prepare the girl child for marriage, especially in a context of dwindled resources.

It would require strategic measures to tackle the root causes of gender inequalities and remove the barriers hampering women's active participation in community-driven development. This calls for concrete actions from local organisations like North West Development Authority (MIDENO), Community Development Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and the Ministry of Women's Affairs (MINCOF). If MINCOF can create more empowerment centres or work out a partnership by using community halls, more women will be drilled and their innate abilities developed. It will permit them acquire leadership skills and develop self-esteem. NGOs like PLAN International, HELVETAS should re-double their efforts by working closely with traditional council and village notables (mostly men) in dismantling some of the laws and customs that impede women's access to land and property ownership, credit, productive inputs, education, and health care. The attempt of PLAN International in dismantling cultural barriers that affects the enrolment of the girl child and special support packages for the education of the girl child is salutary.

Through village sensitisation programmes, customs, beliefs and attitudes that confine women mostly to the domestic sphere should be addressed. Men should be exposed to the advantages and fallouts of sharing household tasks with their spouses for this will permit women to take up additional entrepreneurial activities that will be beneficial to the welfare of the household. HELVETAS is stepping up the participation of women in village development committees by insisting on providing assistance to communities that encourage the involvement of women in the planning, implementation and sustainable management of water supply and road rehabilitation projects. Reasons why, women are also involved in road maintenance schemes, protection of water catchments, pipe-borne water supply and distribution to neighbourhoods etc., activities that were hitherto considered traditionally as strictly male activities. These activities which have the potential for

enhancing female participation have to be supported by donor agencies and other development partners.

The provision of labour saving technology to women farmers remains the most plausible strategy of helping women to gain extra time. In a World Bank poverty assessment study in Cameroon (Bamberger et al., 1995), women were found to be shouldering most of the burden of producing and marketing food. One of the specific actions proposed for improving food security was to target small-scale women farmers with a 'productivity package' of critical agricultural inputs. The assessment confirmed the heavy workload of women. As a result, urgent action was recommended to give women access to transport and to time and labour saving technology, to allow them the opportunity to develop their own skills and participate in community projects. MIDENO and NGOs like AWICO, SAILD and HPI are targeting women's farming groups through credit provision, labour saving technology and farm inputs. They need additional financial resources to extend their coverage and outreach. HELVETAS' effort in the provision of water to rural communities is commendable as it is checking women's drudgery, thereby leaving them with some time to attend community meetings. Strengthening the capacity of these organisations increases women's ability to find ways of meeting their own needs and of contributing to community development projects.

## Conclusion

This study has delved into women's input and constraints in community initiated and driven development. This fits into the ongoing discourse of community participation as a strategy for empowering citizens especially in developing countries to cope with the growing problem of resource scarcity. From the perspective of policy, it is evident that gender issues are rarely taken on board by VDAs leaving room for pre-existing gender roles and community norms to determine community development endeavours. It is noteworthy that women's *njangi* groups are very instrumental in the mobilisation and implementation phases of community projects. However, the relative lack of education and low literacy rate stands out distinctly as the major barrier to women's participation.

From the localities studied, this has seriously incapacitated women's involvement in the decision-making process. This situation is contingent upon the taboo impression of meddling with roles considered strictly to be men's and, worst still, at times having to contest for positions with men. The near absence of women in strategic positions in most villages' executive structures is dismal. Field responses showed that women had never contested certain portfolios like President, Secretary, and Financial Secretary in VDAs. Women shy from contributing ideas during annual congresses and rely mostly on the intervention of elite women, mostly resident in urban areas. There is need to analyse the causes

of oppression and feasible action to redress the causes. The lack of resources needed to follow-up has led some to comment on the disempowering nature of participation (Woodhill, 1996; Nelson and Wright, 1995). Against this backdrop, education and training in bookkeeping and numeric skills remain the best and most potent option of fostering women's participation. Being educated or equipped with basic and functional literacy, women will be able to share and exchange information within village development committees. They will also forestall any attempts at corruption and/or mismanagement of funds, which has rocked some VDAs.

More efforts should be directed at co-opting women into village development committees. The co-optation undertaken by ABADU is a laudable move. In addition, the creation of women's wing and other parallel structures in development associations can enhance female participation. The example of the AWCDA that carries out projects based on the agenda of the women folk is worthwhile but can be counter productive as far as communitarian interest are concerned if women's ideas are not factored into the planning and implementation of major projects.

In sum, the purpose of increasing the participation of women in community development is to address the morass of gender based constraints. This does not necessitate a de-linking of men and women's roles, but rather an integration of the activities of women within the overall development agenda of the community. The timing of major community projects should take into cognisance the socio-economic activities of the area. It should be programmed at appropriate periods to ensure a high rate of female participation. This inclusion will ensure a better appraisal of women's realities and concerns.

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