

IFRTD – COLIN RELF YOUNG VOICES AWARD – ROUND TWO

“Poor rural farmers are central to any solution to today's global food crisis and the long term problems of hunger and poverty”.

Lennart Båge, President of IFAD, April 2008.

Discuss, with examples, the role that rural transport interventions can play in achieving sustainable agricultural development and poverty reduction.

FIRST PLACE WINNING ENTRY – ERIC FOFIRI – CAMEROON

(submitted in French)

Over the last three decades, exports from the rural sector in Cameroon have constituted approximately 55% of Cameroon's export revenues, followed by 30% from hydrocarbons and 15% from the service sector. Export crops (cocoa, coffee, bananas, pineapple...) have formed the major part of rural production at the detriment of subsistence farming which is neglected.

In 2004, Cameroon's agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was estimated at F CFA 1, 587 billion, a little more than 20% of the GDP; compared to 30% for the secondary sector, 33% for service sector and 17% for the non-market sector and taxes.

In terms of employment, the rural sector is the foremost employer engaging 59% of the labour force, or 3.7 million active farmers in 2002 (INS, 2006; MINADER, 2006). Its role in income generation and contribution to poverty alleviation in villages is therefore invaluable.

With regards to food security, agricultural production is used for home consumption as well as for supplying rapidly growing towns; This growth creates conditions that can improve producers' income, through the increased sales of marketable surplus. African villages have taken up the difficult challenge to increase production in the last decade, but they are still faced with the constraint of their poor capacity to transport foodstuffs to urban centres where they are consumed and processed. A careful study of the agro-food industry in Cameroon has shown that there are big loopholes in the rural transport sector (Médjou et al, 2006).

Overview of the state of rural transport in Cameroon

In 2003, Cameroon had a road network of 35, 520 km, divided into tarred roads [4 296 km (12%)] and earth roads [31, 224 km (88%)] (Ministry of Public Works/Road Directorate¹, 2006). The construction of the road network dates back to the colonial period and the classic plan of action applied to trusteeship territories or former colonies was followed, starting with the building of roads from the hinterland to coastal areas to facilitate the transportation of raw materials. The emphasis was on main roads (transit highways) at the detriment of secondary roads used to collect products from production basins.

The maintenance of this road network suffered like many other sectors, due to the economic crisis in the 1990s, and in spite of support from development partners (World Bank, IMF, European Union, ADB) in the last decade, the emphasis has been on transboundary roads (Ngaoundéré-Toubooro-Moundou, Ambam-Kiosi...) aimed at promoting sub-regional integration

¹ Ministry of Public Works - Cameroon

within CEMAC². Secondary roads that connect agricultural production areas to consumption and processing centres are in an advanced state of deterioration due to inadequate allocation to maintenance budgets, or have simply been covered by natural vegetation. In such a context, it becomes very difficult to travel from villages to towns.

Rural transport is provided by a network of small transporters with limited means using pick-ups, antiquated buses...; Truck drivers prefer to transport hydrocarbon and manufacturing products because they are more lucrative and unions have been created to defend these products and maximise the income raised from them. Rural transport remains the poor relative of the Cameroonian national transport system in terms of maintenance and efforts to organise stakeholders.

Rural transport: A bottleneck in agricultural and rural development in Cameroon

Social uprisings that occurred, due to inflation, in many African cities between January and March 2008 (Yaounde, Douala, Dakar, Ouagadougou,...), and which revolved around issues of food and hunger (J.A., N°24613), showed how insecure rural farming, already faced with many difficulties such as access to inputs, technical support, storage, access to markets..., is. Price hikes ranging from 20 to 140% affected import products (rice, palm oil, wheat, flower, sugar) and local crops (millet/sorghum, maize, cassava, cocoyam, plantain...).

This crisis is actually an extension of a recurrent food issue in some regions of the country, especially in the Sudano-Sahelian region, which are faced with natural catastrophes that regularly jeopardize agricultural sustainable development. The fact that Cameroon³ still asks for food aid shows clearly that we still have a long way to go to achieve food self-sufficiency, and consequently sustainable agricultural production.

A thorough analysis of the agricultural and rural sector shows a number of major constraints to its sustainable development, including: (i) poor production and productivity of farms; (ii) difficulties in accessing markets; (iii) poor living conditions; (iv) poor organisation of stake holders; (v) environmental degradation; (vi) inadequate institutional environment; (vii) and insufficient credit (MINADER, 2006). More than 60% of these constraints are directly linked to rural transport.

Six factors that could help improve the contribution that rural transport makes to sustainable development are:

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- **Buying machines for farm mechanisation** due to the massive rural migration that leads to the ageing of work force in villages and the need to increase crop production areas.

About 95% of people who use tractors rent them, and the opportunity to travel long distances is limited because of the poor state of rural roads; Small production areas (0.5 to 2 ha) are therefore over-exploited.

² The Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa

³ In 2005, food needs in the Far-North region were estimated at 200 000 tons, and harvests covered only the needs for six on the eight months required. In cash value, they represented 2 millions US dollars (<http://www.grioo.com/blogs/diplomatix/index.php/2005/09/23/379-programme-alimentaire-mondial-aide-alimentaire-pour-le-cameroun>).

- **Transporting imported agricultural inputs (fertilisers, pesticides, herbicides, seeds) to production areas.** The low use of inputs in many areas is linked to their high costs, to which are added transportation fees that sometimes represent 50% of total charges. This leads to production being barely enough for home consumption; and it is only the production of marketable surplus that can generate substantial income to producers.
- **Producers' access to financing.** Financing agencies are concentrated in urban areas.
- **Institutional and technical support for farmers from agents working in State decentralised services and rural development agencies.** At this level, two major constraints can be noted: i. logistical issues mean the mobility of agents is restricted by the poor state of roads and ii. interventions are limited to the most accessible areas, which are unfortunately not always the most productive.
- **Circulation of market information that is needed to organise and manage business between the different stakeholders in the agricultural sector.** Poor circulation of information is detrimental to producers, as it limits their possibilities to increase their income.
- **Transporting produce to consumption and processing centres.** Difficulties in transporting products, forces producers to sell their crops very cheaply in rural markets, by sale on the tree or next to their farms, thus reducing their profits, to the advantage of wholesalers and other intermediaries.

The remoteness of a large network of rural markets, and collection and transportation points, is a major obstacle to the development of a sub-regional market between Cameroon, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, Chad, Central African Republic and Nigeria, who, thanks to economic recovery⁴, are demanding more and more for current consumption foodstuffs. For example, In October 2008, transportation costs for a bag of maize from May-Baléo (in Adamawa) to Tignère, a locality situated 75 km away, was F CFA 5 000 by bike, the primary transportation means in the area, and F CFA 3 500 by pick-up or Dina bus. T

The poor state of rural roads generates additional handling charges in cases where cargo has to be transferred from one vehicle to another due to the original vehicle becoming stuck in the mud; or because of bridges collapsing, an incidence which is becoming more and more frequent as bridges fall into disrepair (see picture below). The poor state of rural roads causes vehicles to deteriorate quickly and owners to invest less in the transportation of foodstuffs and more in that of hydrocarbon and manufacturing goods.

⁴ For a decade, economic recovery in countries of the Central Africa sub-region is being back up by oil production (Chad, Equatorial Guinea) which generates income flows, thus contributing to improve the purchasing power of urban and rural populations, through the consumption of foodstuffs.



Picture: Transferring a cargo of maize because the vehicle got stuck (left), and the collapse of a bridge (right) Fofiri, Tignère (Adamawa), October 2008

Rural transport is therefore a bottleneck to the sustainable development of agriculture, for it is directly or indirectly linked to all production and distribution factors.

What should be done to improve rural transport in Cameroon?

The transport sector in Cameroon is a 'kingly mission of the state' in that the state is primarily responsible for its organisation, with support from its international development partners. For a long time this has prevented many potential stakeholders (NGOs and businesspeople) from participating in the task of addressing transport limitations.

Examples of capacity transfers by the State to some semi-public companies have proven to be of much interest. This was the case with the Cameroon Cotton Development Corporation (SODECOTON), which since its inception in 1974 has been mandated to build and maintain rural roads in North Cameroon. This project has allowed the opening up of 1/3 of rural areas specialising in the production of cotton seed.

Many companies have invested in this type of venture but it should be noted that their interventions are limited to areas where they themselves have interests. Thus, SODECOTON has been building and maintaining rural roads primarily to collect the seed cotton produced in landlocked areas (Mayo-Rey division in the North region). Other organisations acting in a similar way are the Rice Growing Development and Modernisation Corporation (SEMRY) in the Far-North region; the Cameroon Oil Corporation (SOCAPALM) in the Littoral; Hévéa du Cameroun (HEVECAM) in the South; Cameroon Cocoa Development Corporation (SODECAO) in the Centre; and Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) in the South-West. These corporations aim primarily at supporting export crops (cotton, coffee, cocoa, hevea, banana, pineapple...) because price instability on the international market greatly affects farmers' income.

The emergence of food crops such as millet, maize, peanut, catjang, plantain and cassava in the 90s, following the economic crisis that paralysed African economies was studied by many authors (Chaléard J.-L., 1996, 1997, 2003; Courade G., 1994; Contamin B. et Memel H., 1997) who concluded that it was brought about by farmers' inventiveness faced with this crisis. Food crops generate much income; Even if it is not controlled by the State, nor used to reimburse public debts, it helps significantly improve living conditions in rural areas (paying for children's school fees, medical care, leisure and equipment), and consequently alleviates poverty.

This form of intervention through semi-public corporations marginalises many isolated players that could help with the development of rural transport such as NGOs, development committees, religious organisations, traditional authorities, transporters unions and even decentralised territorial communities (councils), in spite of their limited financial means⁵. The interventions of these stakeholders could be carried out in a harmonised regulatory framework, controlled by the State, especially in areas where corporations have limited activity or are not active at all.

Tax incentives could even be created to encourage transport operators to extend their activities to landlocked areas, and this could be done through unions because there is evidence that union leaders have considerable management skills and experience. For example, In the Touboro sub-division (Adamawa region), truck carrier unions execute the whole process of collecting and managing statistical data on seed crops (peanut, catjang, maize, sesame, millet...).

Finally, it is necessary to demand the amelioration of the governance of the transport sector. It is widely known that many rural road maintenance contracts are either partially executed or not executed at all, leading to the total degradation of these roads after a number of rainy seasons and serving to reinforce the spiral of rural underdevelopment. As the saying goes, where there is a road, development follows.

⁵ In spite of the giant steps made in the decentralisation process in Cameroon since the 1996 Constitution and the 2004 Act on Decentralisation, councils still depend mostly on external resources (Council additional taxes, State subsidies, gifts...). Their self-generated resources come mostly from taxes, that represent less than 30% of the budget of many of them, especially rural councils, and are primarily used to pay workers and travelling expenses. Roads construction and maintenance will still for long be exclusively reserved to the State.