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Please cite this publication as follows:

Fonchingong Che, C. (2017) Shoring up local development initiatives: elderly elite and conscientised empowerment in Cameroon. *International Development Planning Review*, 39 (2). pp. 123-142. ISSN 1478-3401.

Link to official URL (if available):

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3828/idpr.2016.25>

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Charles Fonchingong

Shoring up local development initiatives: elderly elite and conscientised empowerment in Cameroon

The elderly elite constitute a category of social actors implicated in local development through consciousness-raising. The analytic ideas of empowerment and agency, asset-based approaches, social capital, and relational networking inform this paper. Utilising a case study approach, and empirical accounts from the Ndong Awing Cultural and Development and Association (NACDA), in the North-West Region of Cameroon, this article explores conscientised empowerment, a strategy deployed to awaken the local community for social change. The interplay of sociocultural dynamics, gender considerations, community mobilisation and sustainability are intricately balanced, resulting in the community being revived through a renewed development mindset. While expectations of elite involvement remain grandiose; the elite involved in this village-centric development project navigate community aspirations while safeguarding their self-interests. Though elite involvement proves contentious, the community is galvanised by a development manifesto calibrated through relational networking. Local development policy and planning require the harnessing of incremental community resources, building on the agency of key stakeholders, in synergy with the state and other external partners, to realise an effective repositioning of social development.

Keywords: conscientised empowerment, development, elderly elite, infrastructure, relational networking

Introduction: elites and shoring up local development

This article argues that since the economic crisis of the mid-1980s, Cameroon's politics of austerity has dovetailed with a crumbling state infrastructure and institutional incapacity to shore up local community development aspirations. As a result, local communities have developed a strong sense of self-reliance in responding to their particular development needs and interests. Further, elites across the country have appropriated and internalised local communities' expectations that they should lead collective efforts in community development projects aimed at general community improvement and empowerment. Through the concept of conscientised empowerment, this article explores the emergence of village development associations (VDAs) as a response to the social disruptions provoked by current neoliberal rearrangements of the economic order, including structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) (Fonchingong, 1999[AQ1]). Historically, elite interventions in Africa can be traced back to experiences of urbanisation,

and the moral economy of tribal unions and hometown associations, during the late colonial and early postcolonial period. As Little (1957) and Gutkind (1962) outline, voluntary associations were integral to experiences of urbanisation, a distinctive feature of social organisations and adaptation of tribal culture to new urban circumstances and conditions. In this article, the concept of ‘conscientised empowerment’ resonates with village kinship, ethnicity and hometown solidarity that gain currency under new circumstances of economic austerity, and the political liberalisation of associational life in contemporary Africa.

The term ‘elderly elite’ is ethnographically salient in both its emic and etic dimensions. Among the Ndong Awing in the western grassfields, this category of social actor assumes moral and/or political leadership in local development initiatives. Elderly elite status is not culturally construed as age-related; elderly elite are perceived rather as community members who display commitment to village development and empowerment. Thus, the elite are a relatively diverse category of key resource persons in good standing (traditionally, politically, economically and intellectually) within the community and associational life of the Awing Fondom (table 1). (Fondom is defined as the place of traditional authority and the jurisdiction of the Fon (chieftain or king) in the western grassfields.)

Researchers on elite associations in Cameroon (Nkwi, 1997; Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 1998; Yenshu, 2008) have articulated the social importance of conviviality in the western grassfields, and the pressures this can put on local elites to assume social responsibility for local development initiatives. Local elites consider this responsibility a source of social promotion and prestige; they therefore contribute generously to earmarked projects (Nkwi, 1997), and such contributions are important components of

Table 1 Typology of elderly elite and associational life in Awing

Cultural/traditional elite – Fon, village notables, traditional council, quarter heads, Fon’s emissaries and other leaders (ardos)
Political elite – top government functionaries, senior public servants
Intellectual elite, professionals and public servants
Officials of the Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association (NACDA)
Coordinators of affiliated institutions such as the AEEF, cooperatives and quarter development unions
Heads of different religious traditions
Queen mother (nkeum mengye) and president of women’s groups/wings
Officials of the youth wing
Economic elite – senior business persons and entrepreneurs
Diaspora elite – executives and coordinators of the Awing Cultural Association and diaspora council of elders (pekeums)
Retired yet active persons from all walks of life

Source: Authors’ compilation from field data

self-reliant development (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002). In the postcolonial era, the local elite have taken on a political and developmental role, emerging as active citizens in an otherwise demoralised political and civic arena (Nyamnjoh and Rowlands, 1998). The concepts of conscientised empowerment and relational networking extend these arguments, uncovering the contemporary development context.

Local elites navigate competing demands of traditional and modern forms of governance, leveraging an array of cultural assets to empower their communities. This approach, of mobilising and showcasing local active citizens working together for the purpose of improving the well-being of their communities (Kenny, 2011), reinforces the conceptual grounding of community development as ‘a mutual process, that begins in everyday lives, understanding histories, cultures and values, and listening to the hopes and concerns, ushering a [AQ2] process of empowerment and change’ (Ledwith, 2011, 51). However, institutional failings and policy dithering continue to hamper efforts to improve Cameroon’s infrastructure (Fonchingong, 2014). Despite these weaknesses, village associations often offer an unreflective adulation of elite figures and often of state representatives.

Community empowerment is acclaimed as both a form of and for promoting people-centred development (Mayo and Craig, 1995). Similarly, bottom-up development is articulated as a paradigm shift in infrastructure provision involving community participation and development (Craig, 1998[AQ3]; Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002; Fonchingong and Ngwa, 2005; Njoh 2002). For community- and bottom-up development approaches, the promotion of positive and inclusive political and social relationships based on community spirit (Etzioni, 1995) which can enable collective advocacy and social mobilisation are vital (Cornwall, 2008). At the heart of these approaches are commitments to empowerment, based on the belief that the empowerment of the poor is key to overcoming mass poverty by enabling individuals to exercise agency over decision-making processes and enhance their social and economic capital (Chambers, 1983; 2013; Labonte and Laverack, 2008[AQ4]).

With an estimated population of over 21 million, Cameroon is an ethnically diverse country of over 280 ethnic groupings and dialects, with a plethora of social structures and systems of authority evident across the country’s ten regions. Tensions between traditional and modern governance structures undermines the government’s ability to respond adequately to the development concerns of rural communities. These shortcomings create space for local elites to command public policy spaces, while community participation is promoted as a key rural development strategy alongside governmental initiatives (Njoh, 2002; Nyamnjoh, 2001). These moves to development-related community empowerment mean that development is not only a means by which elites are socially created but is also the means by which elites are held to account by their local communities (Orock, 2015).

In this article I undertake an assessment of the Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association (NACDA), a vibrant development-oriented association in the North-West Region, Cameroon (Fonchingong, 2013). Drawing on empirical evidence, I propose the concept of conscientised empowerment (Figure 1) as a template for mobilising, optimising and strategising local resources for social development. Local participation is driven by a collective commitment to pooling together the human and material resources and forming a repository of cultural assets. In the local context, empowerment is characterised as the resources displayed by the elite for building a progressive community mindset, based on mutual effort and a shared vision of development (Chairperson of Awing Education Enhancement Foundation (AEEF)).

While elite involvement in local development is a thorny subject (Fonchingong, 2005; Orock, 2015), this article engages with the role of an elite-propagated conscientising approach to village-centric development. Community development is confronted with the need to build practical approaches for a more just, equal and sustainable future (Ledwith, 2011). How elites negotiate and utilise community agency in the provision of vital, but scarce, infrastructure warrants deeper enquiry. With similarities to Maoist and Chinese approaches of self-reliance (*zi li geng sheng*), communities in Cameroon are crucial actors in finding and realising local development solutions (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002; Tisdell, 2013). Conscientised empowerment is thus framed as a novel strategy of community development, enhanced through mobilising and organising resources, fashioned through awareness, dynamic participation and collective agency.

Conceptual grounding: agency, social capital, empowerment and relational networking

Community development occupies a contested space between top-down and bottom-up development agendas (Ledwith, 2011), often embodying plural objectives and contested practices (Craig et al., 2000; Shaw, 2007). Given the ambiguous position of the elite in engineering local development, the theoretical literature situating agency, community empowerment, capability (strengths-based approach) and relational networking is essential in understanding the contextual realities. The strengths-based approach is an emerging approach in development practice to operationalise participatory development principles originally proposed by Robert Chambers (1983; 2013) (see Burkett, 2011; Ford Foundation, 2002; Mathie and Cunningham, 2003, 2008; O'Leary et al., 2011; Willetts et al., 2013). This approach has roots in the concept of relational networking and draws on the work of Bourdieu (1986) and Giddens (1984), who argue that a network focus can provide insights into how micro-level relationships combine to create and/or challenge broader social structures. Taking this further, Ennis and West's (2010) work on social network analysis begins from a view of social networks as social structures consisting of two elements, actors (or 'nodes' or 'points') and ties

(sometimes referred to as ‘links’ or ‘relationships’). The analytic focus is then not only the internal capabilities and strengths within communities, but also on external links to broader social structures (Ennis and West, 2010, 408).

Human agency is thus at the core of these concerns. Harvey (2002, 173) defines agency as ‘the capacity of persons to transform existing states of affairs’. Others define it as the ability to respond to events outside of one’s immediate sphere of influence to produce a desired effect (Bandura, 2000; Onyx and Bullen, 2000). Krishna (2001) observed that villages with little social capital (a potential – for change, resilience, etc)

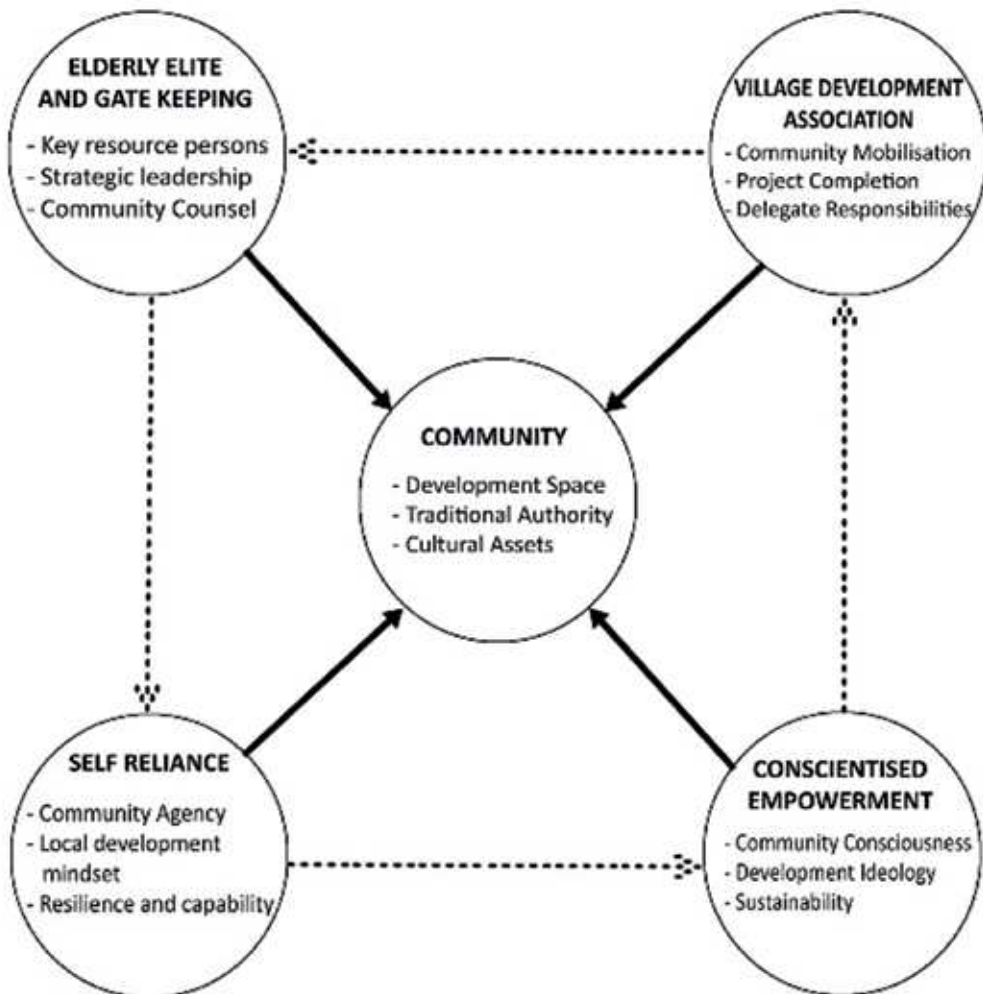


Figure 1 Intersection template of self-reliance and conscientised empowerment

still achieve good results if their agency (the ability to realise or activate potential) is strong. Linked to this, we can think of collective agency as ‘not simply the sum of the efficacy, beliefs of individual members [...] it is an emergent property’ (Bandura, 2006, 75) that affects behaviour and life choices. This notion of agency aligns with Dale (2014, 3), who argues that people demonstrate agency not necessarily for their own self-interest, but also when acting in the collective interest. Although agency may be visible at multiple levels – individual, group or through democratic participation (Alkire, 2005), this article focuses only on community agency, its connectedness, wider implications and replication in village-centric development.

Agency alone, however, is not sufficient to realise better local development outcomes. Rather, there is a need for conscientised empowerment (Figure 2) [AQ5] to transform mindsets and promote self-reliant development through a results-oriented approach, one evidenced elsewhere as successful in translating boardroom ideas into meaningful development outcomes (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002). Such an approach also reinforces the importance of community resilience and the need to pursue sustainable development outcomes: as the AEEF Chairperson alludes, it is imperative to provide the community with ‘long-term solutions for sustenance rather than a fish for a day’.

The local vision of social development is driven by the conscientisation of community members. The AEEF calls for the community to utilise its assets and education to cultivate a critical consciousness and conscience as the basis for community mobilisation and as a platform from which to tackle suffering and dehumanisation (Friere, 1972, 1994). When it is deeply rooted in the praxis of change, conscientisation can readily and sustainably maintain both self- and social empowerment. I draw on the conscientisation framework to explicate elite input achieved through a carefully tailored development vision and a narrative of ‘*let’s build our community and not wait on others to do it for us*’ as intimated by the AEEF’s president.

The intersection template in Figure 1 captures the dynamics of local development within a spatial location, characterised by relational networking and strategic leadership. The recognition of strengths is more likely to inspire positive action than a focus on needs and problems, and describe the empowering potential of a strengths-based process [AQ6] (Mathie and Cunningham, 2008, 122): ‘The logical consequences of focusing on assets, capacities, and capabilities is to encourage a proactive role for the citizen, replacing the passive, dependent role of client in the welfare service delivery model of community development practice’. Local development hinges on the community taking the initiative to solve problems and driving change, in a sustainable way. Communities or local environments are rich in resources or assets including individuals, associations, institutions, and natural and built environments (Mathie and Cunningham, 2008, 122; Saleebey, 2009, 7), and nurturing these existing strengths will contribute to a process of positive change (Winterford, 2013) under

community ownership. This community agency and ownership is seen as crucial to the sustainability of development based upon local self-reliance (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003, 474; SEWA, 2006, 31).

Methodology and context

Located in the Santa subdivision of Mezam division, in the North-West Region of Cameroon, Awing village is bordered by the hamlets of Mendankwe, Akum and Santa. With a population of 55,000 (2005 census), Awing's economy is based on subsistence agriculture and the sale of palm wine and agricultural produce. Local food cooperatives and unions support village households with concerns including sustenance, medical bills and school fees for their children. Proximity to the regional capital, Bamenda, has enabled villagers to secure education and employment, although this has also facilitated emigration from the region. However, these flows of people have resulted in support for local development through active village associations across Cameroon and in the diaspora.

Mindful that community development should not be externally driven by the researcher's objectives local people's perspectives were prioritised through contextually-sensitive research. A case study approach was adopted utilising observation and interview data from randomly sampled elite and community members (Yin, 2003). The case study examined the 'gatekeeping' role of the elite. Based on documentary and archival evidence elicited from NACDA, comparisons were drawn between the agency displayed by the NACDA elite and community members' perceptions of development, and questions of agency addressed with specific reference for the AEEF – an offshoot of NACDA.

Fifteen community members were randomly selected from the elderly elite, including NACDA executive and ordinary members, [AQ7] for semi-structured interviews. These participants varied in age (forty-five to seventy), gender, and educational and social backgrounds. Some of the elderly elite had no formal education, although most had post-primary education, and community members worked in diverse sectors in Awing, across Cameroon and overseas. NACDA has a long history as a resilient and development-oriented association in Cameroon's North-West Region, with an enviable track record of elite input, dynamic participation and heightened popular participation from all stakeholders – traditional authority, women, youth and community members (Fonchingong, 2013).

To test the applicability of self-reliance in action, an interview protocol was developed based on the research questions and available NACDA documentary materials. Interviews lasted an hour, on average, and were conducted in LANGUAGE [AQ8] or Pidgin English. The transcripts were read over repeatedly and codes applied, modified and revised as dominant themes began to emerge (Miles and Huberman,

1994). Alongside the interviews, contextual coverage of NACDA's fiftieth anniversary celebrations was validated with group discussions involving community members in order to facilitate an understanding of what constitutes self-reliant development of the community. Also, three government officials working in community development were interviewed to gain insight into governmental views on self-reliant development. The research methodology reflects Thomas's 'knowledge-development research' (Thomas, 1980), which emphasises the process approach, entailing description and contextual analysis of people's experience of development. This participatory approach is founded upon 'an understanding that research problems are defined through dialectic and this means a more ambiguous and shifting relationship between the research questions and the communities in which they are studied' (Graham and Jones, 1992, 237–38).

Findings and discussion

NACDA and local development initiatives

NACDA, located in the village of Awing, in the North-West Region of Cameroon, was established in 1962 in Buea, South-West Region. Founded in 1962, NACDA currently has sixty-three branches (locally and overseas), a women's wing of twenty-five

Table 2 NACDA projects, timescales and initial costs

Projects	Timescale	Costs (FCFA)
2010 Fact Book (census and development needs data)	3 months	4,293,500
School-GSS Awing-Azane (2 classrooms, 2 staff rooms plus 5 toilets)	11 years	8,273,250
Adopt a spot (roundabouts with directions)	1 year	5,567,600
AEEF Scholarship Fund (62 awards)	Ongoing	22,793,500
Equipping medical centre	3 months	4,399,000
Upgrading Awing Fon's palace for golden jubilee	3 years	25,232,566
Water extension project (80% sponsored by Swiss government and 20% by NACDA)	5 months	5,556,120
Extension of water project (75% sponsored by GTZ (Germany) and 25% by NACDA)	4 months	5,175,000
GPS for internet connection – entire village	Ongoing	1,703,000
Extension of electricity project, initially supplied by Elite	Ongoing	Ongoing
Awing village hall and palace esplanade	Completed	Completed
Women's empowerment centres	Completed	Completed
Roads, bridges, market stalls, schools	Ongoing	Ongoing

Source: NACDA 2015

branches, a youth wing with fifteen branches and nine quarter development unions. It also comprises other social networks (tax groups) nationwide (NACDA archives, 2015. [AQ9]) NACDA's mission statement, embedded in its constitution, is unambiguous: 'uniting around self-reliant development of Awing Fondom, creating an atmosphere of peace, promoting its diverse cultural and social acumen, and projecting a good image of the Fondom'.

Since NACDA's inception, its constitution has been amended to reflect changing sociocultural dynamics, along with alterations to the association's name, development dues/levies for village projects, and its operational model was changed in line with the associations law introduced by Cameroon government in 1990 (Tanga and Fonchingong, 2009). [AQ10] NACDA executives are keen to secure institutional backup and other investment from central government, although there is often stiff competition with neighbouring hamlets for this support. In an effort to secure investment, NACDA undertook a household headcount [AQ11] to make a case for more development grants and a greater share of the 'national cake' from central government. According to one NACDA official, it was thought that 'the headcount data will cancel out squabbles with other hamlets in Santa subdivision over development packages and appointments to key government positions'. [AQ12]

Infrastructure needs such as water and electricity supply, health needs and increased school enrolment rates are key social development concerns pursued by NACDA. Service provision is undertaken in partnership with community authorities, who oversee decisions in traditional councils, and enhance traditional governance through designated ward and chapter representatives.

Other projects implemented included roads rehabilitation, equipping health clinics, providing essential textbooks for pupils, schools, funding salaries of teachers' hired through the Parent Teacher Association, building bridges and culverts, creating a fact book (database of Awing citizens), developing a cultural manifesto for earmarked development projects, completion of cultural halls [AQ13] in different regions of Cameroon (Table 2). These projects are implemented through a community schedule in which the contribution of labour and expertise from the community is commonplace. Members take on tasks such as digging, building and collecting stones, sand and water. Women's groups also provide food for the workers on-site (Fonchingong and Fonjong, 2002; Fonchingong and Ngwa, 2005; Fonchingong, 2005).

AEEF and conscientised empowerment

The preamble of the NACDA constitution refers to 'sensitising one another towards self-reliant development'. Arguably, a key pillar of conscientised empowerment is the ability to mobilise the masses for the common good. The speech by Megmefo'o Prof. Jerry Saliki, the first chairperson of the AEEF, is instructive:

the AEEF was founded in 2012 and is designed to develop a sustainable fund for education in Awing. We operate on a simple idea: money collected from various donors in Awing and beyond is saved; the principal [original capital] will never be touched, but the interest earned every year will be used to give scholarships, as well as to fund other aspects of education in Awing. [AQ14]

Within the speech are attempts to conscientise community members to the course of development [AQ15]:

the importance of today's event lies not on [AQ16] the number of pupils that will receive scholarships or the total amount to be dispensed today, but in the historical nature of what we have started: one of the first sustainable self-help education foundations in Cameroon [...]. Scholarship schemes that have been established across many villages and schools in Cameroon eventually fizzle out after a few years because of donor fatigue. Donor fatigue is what we want to avoid. Ours is meant to last forever because we are not counting on anyone having to donate money to the foundation every year or beyond what they have already done. [...] I want to paraphrase a popular Chinese saying 'if you give a person a fish you have fed them for one day, if you teach them how to fish, you have fed them for a lifetime'. It follows that: 'if you give a child 5,000 frs today, over the long term you might feed them for 5 years and beyond'. AEEF is all about investing in the future: in the education of Awing children. And because of its everlasting nature, AEEF seeks to support the education of Awing children for generations to come.

The notions of conscientised empowerment and relational networking are embedded in this speech. The conscientising message is underpinned by a forward-thinking mindset enhanced through solidarity and relational networking. The AEEF counts on a community spirit of ownership, a common sense of direction and a shared destiny. It enables an optimisation of cultural assets, building a development momentum that is results-oriented, deliverable and outcomes-based. This entails the provision of much-needed services, beneficial to the community.

In fostering relational networking, the creation of mutual-based schemes to improve educational attainment and health care requires the dynamic participation of all, including women and youth groups. The AEEF chair's speech squares with the conscientising narrative:

to all Awing sons, daughters and friends of Awing: this new baby [AEEF] will only grow and play its role if nourished. Its nourishment will come in the form of your financial contributions to beef up its capital. Indeed, it's only when AEEF's capital grows that we can earn enough interest to do all the things I listed above (merit-based scholarships, need-based scholarships, teachers' incentives).

The AEEF chair builds on this sense of community agency to foster dynamic participation – a key marker of empowerment. Asnarulkhadi and Aref's (2009)

Malaysian case study identifies how a spirit of mutual help, an ideal which underpins traditional Asian community spirit, hastens the achievement of shared interests through group-based activities. By understanding the spirit of collective action it is possible to comprehend the dynamic aspects of group processes. As captured in the AEEF chairperson's speech, development begins with 'sowing the right seed and spirit' to promote collective empowerment as people join forces in action to overcome obstacles and attain social change (Hur, 2006).

The AEEF chairperson envisaged a cautious approach; generating starting capital by using the 'principal interest' (Figure 2) caters for a reconstructed mindset. [AQ5 /AQ17] This mindset is underpinned by a progressive philosophy of habituating community members to a long-term view. Such a strategy is in line with Freire's practice of liberation, which 'is to be conducted from the bottom up, rather than the traditional, top-down development scheme [AQ18] (Freire, 1973, 49). Focusing on a major need of the community – education – the AEEF chairperson firmly lays the foundational thinking. By appealing to the entire community everyone is drawn on board the collective agenda. The sensitisation of community members and relational networking are vital. The Fon's communiqué [AQ19] epitomises the conscientising strategy:

Our palace, water, electricity, roads, bridges, school, hospitals, and churches are here today not by chance but because of our endurance. We have reason to celebrate these successes because from figures gotten from the data exercise, I have observed that Awing children are found in all the continent[s] of the world. We are unquestionably one of the best fondoms in the North-West Region because we possess good hunters around the globe who think first about the development of their home. I consider this as one of the most important assets of the Awing man that we must preserve jealously. (<http://www.ndongawing.org/Fondom.html>) [AQ20]

The hunting analogy resonates with Nyamnjoh's (2001) domesticated agency argument, buttressing the ambivalent position of elite involvement in local development [AQ21]. Such domestication emphasises negotiation, concession and conviviality. Individuals who refuse to work to enhance their community are those most likely to be denied public space to articulate their personal desires. The city and the 'world out there' are perceived as hunting grounds; the home village is where one returns at the end of the day. Investing in one's home village is seen as the best insurance policy, and a sign of ultimate success, for it guarantees survival even when one has lost everything in the city, and secures and manifests success in satisfying obligations [AQ22] (Nyamnjoh, 2001, 31). Negotiating these spaces captures the complex ways in which elites can be simultaneously part of and separate from the village communities they seek to 'develop'.

Conceptualising empowerment is problematic, 'partly because of the contextual factors in its use' (Adams, 1996: 10). However, in the context of Cameroon, where the politics of identity and ethnicity creates a hegemonic state (Fonchingong, 2005),

community empowerment constitutes an attempt to embed a development philosophy of self-reliance at grassroots level. Empowerment is both a product and a process (Staples, 1990) of social development in which people, as subjects in their own environment, seek out ways to meet collective needs and expectations and to overcome common problems (Asnarulkhadi and Aref, 2009). Thus, when the AEEF chair observed that ‘donor fatigue is what we want to avoid’ [AQ23] in ensuring the sustainability of educational scholarships for the community we see both the prioritising of education as a tool of empowerment, and the importance of community-rooted solutions to this problem (in this case, the endowing of scholarships through community payments).

Gender considerations and women’s empowerment

Empowerment involves a form of education that encourages people to question their reality: this is the basis of collective action and it is built on the principles of participatory democracy (Ledwith, 2011, 2–3). Community empowerment is attuned to building social capital through community agency, an a priori condition that manifests itself at both the individual and the collective level through social mobilisation and network formation (Dale and Newman, 2010; Dale, 2014, Ling and Dale, 2014), focusing on inclusive development and relational networking, including the integration of women. In Awing, women promote empowerment and mobilisation through the creation of women’s groups: njangis, also termed rotating savings and credit associations (ROSCAs) (Ardener and Burman, 1995), and social and health clubs. The nkeum mengye (the Fon’s senior wife) address women’s concerns presented at traditional councils and general assembly development discussions and debates. Within NACDA, however, men dominate the senior positions: there are no legal restrictions on women holding key leadership positions, few women put themselves forward for senior leadership positions (most likely due to dominant gendered cultural traditions). In the NACDA general executive structure, men hold fifteen of the top leadership positions, with only two posts held by women. In the technical and project committees, there are ten men and no women; there are seven men in the quarter development unions and no women; worldwide, there are fifty-nine male branch chairpersons and three female (NACDA executive database, 19 February 2013). [AQ24] Currently, the main arena to foster women’s empowerment within the NACDA is the association’s women’s wing which both represents women’s issues at general assemblies and provides practical empowerment support through cooperatives, skills development and training in micro-enterprise development, providing capital to support small business ventures and pooled savings from women’s business activities. The viability of such small businesses and the returns from empowerment centres permit members to make yearly contributions and to donate to project committees on earmarked projects. Approximately one third of the NACDA development dues are ploughed back into

the women's wing (NACDA executive 2013[AQ25]). Both agency and empowerment are intrinsically valuable and can be instrumentally effective in promoting human development and reducing poverty (Alkire, 2009).

Women in Awing often take part in community mobilisation and fundraising to promote village-centric development. One women's wing member outlined how 'We're trying our best to see that Awing village makes progress, by always paying our development levy'. [AQ26] Further, the president of the women's wing told me: 'when I became chairperson in 2010, my main goal was to foster greater unity amongst women in Awing to work under one umbrella, to redouble their efforts for the progress of our village. The number of women attending meetings, and taking an active part in NACDA activities has increased'. She went further: 'Apart from infrastructure development, we continue to sensitise mothers and our daughters on hygiene issues and diseases like malaria, cholera and HIV/AIDs. We use gatherings to emphasise cultural norms, and encourage women to take up leadership positions in NACDA'. Asked what makes NACDA a resilient, development-focused association, one female interviewee noted: 'as women, we are given room to go ahead and initiate our own projects. The women's wing is a very important arm of NACDA; it is like a voice for women in NACDA. Projects like health centres, social centres and women's centres are projects that mean a lot to us, so we try and raise funds to enable us to complete these projects'. A member from the women's wing of a regional branch said: 'As NACDA grows, we can beat our chests to say we were part of it and contributed to its growth. We have succeeded in repairing the roof and pillars of [the] women's centre in the village which was a problem'. Such assertions tie up with the enabling aspect of empowerment according to Labonte and Laverack (2008), implying that people cannot 'be empowered' by others; they can only empower themselves by acquiring more of power's different forms. The excerpts outlined above demonstrate efforts to creating sustainable, community-based structures and processes for development which are intended to have direct and measurable impact on policy and daily life, fitting to Craig's (2002) definition of empower in community development. However, while NACDA's activities may support women's empowerment in some ways, issues remain in relation to power, leadership roles and male-dominated traditions that can lead to disempowerment. A major concern is how an empowerment strategy can be sustainable in the face of multiple layers of cultural power and the tenuous relationships between these associations and state institutions.

External assistance

Although NACDA's philosophy views development as first and foremost locally driven, strategic use is made of external development partners. The engagement of overseas development partners, like the British High Commission, the Swiss Ambassador and

German diplomatic missions in Cameroon, is partly attributed to elite connections. At NACDA's fiftieth anniversary, then British High Commissioner to Cameroon Bharat Joshi reiterated the relevance of self-reliant development: 'only you can make your country an emerging economy by 2035. We can only help but we can't tell you how to do it'. Invigorating self-reliant development hinges on strategic leadership within different tiers of indigenous governance and local authority, in synergy with executive members of the association, and development partners. The NACDA constitution underscores the relevance of traditional authority (the Fon and council) working in tandem with VDA officials to get projects initiated and completed.

Different wards of NACDA undertake development tasks, based on delegated responsibilities. In return, cultural assets are utilised to galvanise community members committed to self-reliant development, including the conferment of traditional titles and other accolades to indigenous and international partners for their dedication to and support of community-driven development. The Swiss Ambassador to Cameroon (Uli Berner) was knighted by the Fon of Awing with the title Mbah-ntiante ('an organiser') for providing funds (4.6 million frs CFA), on behalf of the Swiss government towards the completion of Awing's water project. Such strategies, as outlined by Ledwith (2011, 14), are attuned to collective action for change, which follows through from local to structural levels, in order to make a sustainable difference.

The importance of elder elites in providing strategic leadership for these processes is recognised within the local community, who view these elites as cultural assets for their wisdom, political, intellectual, economic weight and social standing linked to their service for the community. Thus, community members acclaimed these elites for their inputs in dispute resolution: 'they show wisdom and experience at its fullest' 'they are a community force and baobab', 'an old broom that sweeps all village corners and crevices better', and 'promoters of village identity and culture'. Dale and Onyx (2005) noted that diverse human capital and strong interpersonal skills in building social capital are vital for the implementation of sustainable development at the community level.

Elite: makers or spoilers

While some community members heralded the elite's social responsibility as a catalyst for local development, others considered their input controversial. The current political climate in which the elite undertake development to serve their vested political interests (Fonchingong, 2005; Orock, 2015) lends credence to these concerns. Accusations have been levelled against the elite for using community spirit to serve their vested political interests. One interviewee noted: 'we count on our elite to help us with development but others' intentions are not genuine [...] they use the community as a staging post to market themselves'. Community members hold that the elite only show up before major elections to canvass for votes by providing erratic support such as provision

of basic food stuffs such as rice, sugar, vegetable oil, soap and building materials such as paint, roofing sheets and cement for earmarked projects. Major projects are often left unfinished as funds and the supplies of materials dry up in the post-election period. Similarly, the AEEF chairperson sounded a note of caution, that the AEEF scholarship scheme ‘will only grow and play its role if nourished. Its nourishment will come in the form of your financial contributions to beef up its capital’ (Figure 2).

Therefore, mobilising the community through conscientisation, as envisaged by AEEF president, is not only in line with social network ideas connected to the strengths-based approach but is essential to ensuring the sustainability of such development endeavours in a context of distrust towards certain leaders. The call for sustainability, echoed by the AEEF chairperson, complements the notion of a visionary, active citizenship, conceptualised by Kenny (2011) as citizens who challenge the existing structures, values and power relations within their society. There is a need for the state to build on the assets of these local associations as they grapple with their development needs.

Community-state relations

Though support from central government remains erratic, the elite, traditional rulers and VDAs create links with local government administrators and other, decentralised arms of government. In the case of NACDA, the elite assist in soliciting funds, technical expertise for projects and institutional backup. Frontline institutions like health, education, agriculture and rural development are vital (www.ndongawing.org). Government support for VDAs is evident in policy discourse. For example, at NACDA’s fiftieth anniversary, the government official [AQ27] speaking on behalf of the Ministry of Culture lauded NACDA’s drive for self-development, offered a financial package worth 2 million frs CFA, while stating ‘I want to express my congratulations to the job done by NACDA so far. You have contributed a lot to change [AQ28] the image and the lives of the people of Awing. We are behind you’ (*The Post*, 19 November 2012). [AQ29]) The elite continue to legitimate their position in the politics of development by lobbying for community development projects such as schools, health centres, rehabilitation of roads from central government (Fonchingong, 2005; Orock, 2015). The deployment of key personnel and practitioners (social workers, health workers, welfare officials and other development or outreach workers) to work closely with community associations is vital to mobilising and better strategising community resources.

Supporting community members to engage with the government is important in order to expand the civil space for participation (Mathie and Cunningham, 2003). Ledwith (2011) argued that the ambivalent relationship between community work and state intervention limits the potential of community development. Truly participatory development does not just teach, engage and empower communities, it teaches,

engages and empowers the organisations that work with communities, to see and do things differently (Eversole and Routh, 2005). Elites cannot shoulder the burden of community development single-handedly (Fonchingong, 2005; Orock, 2015), instead there is a need to remake participation as a multidirectional process drawing upon the embedded knowledge and networks that communities – and specifically community members – can mobilise (Eversole, 2012).

Conclusion

This article has argued that in addressing deficits in community infrastructure, the notions of conscientised empowerment and relational networking are gaining currency in the indigenous polities of Cameroon. In this context, the elderly elite are key resources in awakening community consciousness for community driven development. Their ability to promote active engagement, gender awareness and heightened agency in service provision, represents core foundations of bottom-up, endogenous development. It is contended that conscientised empowerment entails elite participation and facilitation which requires relational networking built on community agency to realise developmental outcomes. This strategy is grounded in a long-term perspective of development predicated on the community's conscience and dynamic participation. The conscientising strategy is amplified through benchmarking progress and ensuring an all-on-board and outcome-based approach of development through linkages with the state and other development partners.

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