

Community Agency, Needs mapping and Solidarity Economics in Resource Depleted Communities

Abstract

Against the backdrop of shrinking budgets for most social welfare departments in most of sub Saharan Africa, there is a shortfall of essential services. Within the ambit of village associations, community-driven needs mapping is heralded as an alternative pathway. Anchored on the conceptual framing of social theory, social capital and social economy; this qualitative case study, argues that solidarity initiatives and capability focused outcomes deliver social development, and other welfare projects for most disadvantaged communities of North West, Cameroon. Findings point to peripheral state involvement in calibrating a development agenda, constraining members to utilize village associations, the repository of indigenous assets, and other relational networks, *njangis*, quarter development unions, cooperatives and diaspora networks. These overlapping solidarity networks enable members to mobilize hard earned financial resources; largely ploughed back into community development ventures. A key outcome of these forms of solidarity remains direct capitalisation - personal income catering not only for members' livelihoods, most of all, building a reservoir and asset base, impacting on livelihoods and community development. Policy formulation and design is yet to calibrate these mechanisms of ground-up, village centric development. Galvanising these solidarity assets, deployed for progressive social and economic change require meaningful co-production of stakeholder engagement strategies, and revamped state-community relations. Embedding these policies in rural development planning would enable a sustainable solidarity economics, nurtured through community assets-base, building on collective agency, autonomy and resilience.

Keywords: Agency; community; cultural assets; needs mapping; relational networks; solidarity; village associations

Introduction

Social and solidarity Economy (SSE) has been advanced as an alternative strategy for pooling scarce resources, particularly in resources depleted rural communities of less developing economies (Fonchingong, C. 2013, 2018). SSE has been advanced as a policy instrument that can ease the attainment of sustainable development goals (SDGs) at the local level (UNRISD and GSEF 2018), particularly community based mutual health organisations (Alenda-Demoutiez and Boidin, 2019). However, the viability of SSE as a model for resuscitation of these communities warrants further investigation due to escalating levels of spatial, social, political and economic inequalities (Fonchingong, C. 2016). A pertinent, yet unexplored challenge is the agency displayed by village associations as a conduit for solidarity initiatives. A bigger concern centres around sustainability, given the myriad overlay of social relations and dynamics embedded. The notions of social relations, based on a cooperative organization, capable of guiding local development are fundamental functions of a social economy (Barkin and Lemus 2014, Kim and Lim, 2017). In solidarity-based exchange systems, producers and consumers recognize their interdependence, and attempt to create new arrangements for doing business that are reciprocally supportive and shielded from the problems of market exchange (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005), warrants further investigation. Rather than being absorbed on the build-up of capital and ensuring profit accumulation, they emphasize the satisfaction of basic human needs-both physical and social, which are often invisible

(Dinerstein 2015). It is unclear how these solidarity networks are positioned in livelihoods and service provision. At a time of increased clamour for citizen driven alternatives to the dominant neo-liberal economic model. Perhaps, solidarity economics provides a pathway to re-focus on everyday livelihood challenges, and people's ecological realities in resource depleted settings. This study's remit is highlighting the role played by village development associations (VDAs) as a spatial and economic catalyst, in seeking out practical and transformative solutions through needs mapping and community agency. This paper investigates the strategies for scaling up SSE, ensuring sustainable and inclusive rural development. Renowned for its flagship rural livelihoods improvement strategies in the north-west region of Cameroon, The Ndong Awing cultural and development association (NACDA) constitutes the focal point. SSE centres on everyday practices of alternative ways of living, producing, and consuming (Kawano and Miller 2008). In its ambiguity, SSE envisions sustainable livelihoods, social enterprises, deviating approaches to economy, participative policy formulation, and decent working conditions, by highlighting the social and human assets dimension; considering diverse forms of collective organization, such as cooperatives, networks, and unions (Caruana and Srnc 2013, Laville 2015, Saguier and Brent, 2017).

Based on values of solidarity, autonomy, cooperation and reciprocity, SSE seeks non-capitalistic economic relations and forms of grassroots socioeconomic organization to transform hierarchical and authoritarian models and operations (Moulaert and Ailenei, 2005; Moulaert and Nussbaumer, 2005). SSE particularly privileges those segments of society which have been historically marginalized, discriminated against and politically, socially and economically excluded. Often community-based organizations and social movements are embedded. In this way, SSE also comprises a set of indigenous survival strategies developed by marginalized social sectors and non-capitalist cultures. Dinerstein (2015) suggests SSE as a tool for organizing hope; a practice that enables people to envision alternatives - future practices, relationships and horizons - in the present guiding concrete actions for the future. This paper validates the proposition that a viable SSE framework is built on indigenous livelihood strategies, upheld by collective and reciprocal elements, anchored on everyday spatial realities and ecosystem of the people.

Theoretical proposition: Social capital, Social theory, Livelihood diversification and Social economy

In this study, the theoretical proposition on solidarity economics are orbited on social capital, livelihood diversification and social enterprise. In social economy theory, social enterprises facilitate sustainable local development by including relational assets which embody social capital, bearing on social innovation processes and dynamics (Kim and Lim 2017, Fonchingong C. 2018). It is argued that the social context and social architecture, including social norms and leverage for social development are legitimate concerns of citizens. Solidarity within this study is conceptualized as new ways of mobilizing scarce resources for everyday living, anchored on principles of self-help; inward looking strategies organized and re-distributed for communal benefit (Fonchingong, C. 2013, 2018). In so doing, local resources are meaningfully deployed, other forms of support sourced, promoted by cultural and relational assets, vital recipes for local economic take-off and social development (Fonchingong, C. 2018). The NACDA gravitates an economic model that is people oriented, engineered through community

agency and needs mapping. Such a model is hinged on the optimisation of both cultural and relational assets, geared at securing livelihoods and uplifting the economic well-being of the local community (Fonchingong, C. 2013, 2017, 2018).

Within the context of social capital, people are viewed as bonding and forming meaningful relationships, both transactional and supportive in nature (Putnam 1993). Livelihood diversification has reconceptualised the debate on peripheral disadvantage and the need to focus on contextual development realities (Leo de Haan 2017). The legitimacy of livelihoods diversification gains currency within theoretical narratives on enterprise development and social economy (Kim and Lim 2017). The solidarity economy paradigm is legitimised through citizen organising and a search for alternative ways of production and redistribution of vital assets and resources for the benefit of members (Fonchingong, C. 2013, Dash 2015).

Addressing the social aspects of development without necessarily obliterating its materialistic tendencies is ingrained in notions of solidarity economics which remains contested and ambiguous. Proponents of social theory (Coleman 1990) and social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Putnam, 2000). Social capital is conceptualised as the relational structures and institutional norms of social bonds and behaviours, hinged on promoting trust in organizations and communities, and is the foundation of the links between morality and internal norms. The concepts of solidarity and relationships within social capital context are separated into two -the bonding capital and the bridging capital. The bonding capital discusses relationships in the community or organization, whereas the bridging capital denotes networks between the organization and community (Putnam 2000). A dynamic balance must be struck between social capital and sustainable community development (Dale and Onyx 2005). Academic literature is confronted with envisioning a more acceptable paradigm of solidarity economy underpinned by contextual realities, capability of mobilisation, and accumulation particularly in resource constrained communities. In gaining a nuanced understanding, the VDAs framework represented within this study points to the complexity of calibration and sustainability of solidarity economics as an alternative model. A key factor to consider is how needs are mapped and negotiated within different spatial contexts.

Most importantly, the theoretical proposition signals the need to reconfigure and operationalize solidarity economics to better calibrate the needs and agency of members. As Bourdieu (1986) notes social capital develops incrementally, and accrues with individuals' level of engagement in relationships, which in turn generates the resources people can use and rely on to pursue their interests. However, as Coleman (1998) averred social capital is embedded within the social structure. One cannot discount the triggers and stressors; the characteristics of the system would facilitate action as typified by the social structure. Beyond the Keynesian principle of wealth accumulation in society, poverty remains a scourge. In the light of regenerating communities, basic needs mapping and other functional elements of solidarity-mutual cooperation, autonomy and decision making, social solidarity and social justice, hinged on productive diversification, improving the wellbeing of every member of the community, in a sustainable way are cardinal (Barkin and Lemus 2014). Whilst social theory and social capital cannot predict the future, it is inferred that the social and spatial dynamic elements, embedded in these theories, are crucial in understanding the utility, and sustainability of social economics.

It is contended the totality, density, deficits and capability of social and spatial networks are key determinants of solidarity economics in resource constrained communities.

Study context and Methodology

Cameroon has a chequered colonial history, following a foray by the Portuguese, Germans and later splintered between French and English with the fusion of Anglophone and Francophone separate identities (Fonchingong C. 2005). 40% of Cameroon's population of 23.7 million people live below the poverty line and human development indicators remain low, with growing levels of social inequality, not helped by a corrupt political elite and inept governance (WFP 2018, Fonchingong C. 2016, 2018). Cameroon is an ethnically and geographically diverse country with more than 280 ethnic groups. Though Cameroon has had a period of relative political stability, this is now in tatters with the recent surge in clamour for secession in the English speaking, north west and south west regions (Human rights watch 2019). Cameroon's economy is projected to grow annually, however, the outcome of this growth remains uneven and yet to trickle down to large segments of the population. Most rural areas are trapped in poverty, compounded by weak infrastructure, unprecedented levels of economic and social dislocation, exacerbated by institutional failings and government wavering on its decentralization policy promise (Fonchingong, C. 2018).

In its diversity, the English-speaking regions particularly the Northwest region (study site) are renowned for its mosaic of traditional authority, and solidarity built on the vestiges of British colonial role. The NACDA showcased is a flagship organisation with an unquestionable pedigree, and track record of self-reliant development initiatives (Fonchingong C. 2017, 2018), involving village centric, indigenous assets, and social networks, a crucial platform for solidarity economics. Cameroon's landscape on social development and local government which should strengthened solidarity ventures is nuanced, obfuscated by the 1990 Law of Association and decentralisation that remains contentious (Tanga and Fonchingong C. 2009, Fonchingong C. 2016).

This study is anchored on the epistemological standpoint and ecological experience of growing up, and coping within a resource constrained environment, not helped by lethargic governance and limited state intervention in livelihoods, particularly in rural areas. This qualitative case study uncovers the basis of solidarity economics within a resourceful village development association, a bedrock for strategizing and re-invention of peripheral solidarity for livelihood improvements for rural communities operating at the margins (Fonchingong 2018, Leo de Haan 2017). Qualitative data constituted the totality of information obtained for the study. Qualitative research is primarily exploratory and aims to provide insight and core understanding of a phenomena, enabling deeper assembly of core opinions, motivations and reasons (Yin, 2011), though researcher subjectivity, bias in fieldwork, observations and reporting are potential flaws of data generated and analysed (Platt 1992, Yin 2011).

A case study as strategy of qualitative inquiry provides ample back up in terms of understanding a phenomenon within its real-life context, representing the views, and perspectives of participants (Stake 2008; Yin, 2011:7). The logic of design (Platt 1992) revolves around empirical data, uncovering contextual conditions. Ultimately, the end

goal is to go beyond data points by looking at more variables of interest, with focus on multiple sources of evidence and data converged in a triangulating style (Yin 2011:9). Semi structured interviews involving 71 participants and information gleaned from key informants, NACDA documents and secondary sources constituted the data generated. Empirical evidence nested in participants narratives illuminate the foundations of solidarity economics, detached from the contextual realities of participants and workings of the village organisation. Despite the contentious nature of case study research its major strengths of a grounded perspective, understanding of context and process (Flyvbjerg 2011:314), informed the methodological standpoints of this study. Generating empirical data that strives to use multiple sources of evidence and contributing insights into existing or emerging concepts that may help to explain human behaviour (Yin 2011:8) is in alignment with the foundational methodological standing of this study.

Findings and Discussion

VDA as spatial solidarity catalyst

VDA remains the overarching structure at the top of the pyramid. Solidarity is anchored and leveraged through operational structures of the VDA. As observed in the case study, VDA provides strategic vision and direction for the community which serves as an assemblage of cultural and relational assets. Agency is modulated on community self-help leveraged through a gamut of cultural and relational assets (Fonchingong, C. 2018). The layered solidarity model captured in figure 1 represents the different tiers of social grouping such as quarter development unions, cooperatives, mutual groups, njangis, other relational and cultural enclaves, all galvanised through the VDA. What underpins the broad nature of support available is the use of VDAs as an ‘umbrella’ for individual and community livelihoods improvement. Uncontestably, VDAs remain an arena for galvanising community members, pooling together the vast array of cultural, and relational assets within the community (Fonchingong, C. 2018). In the context of local and regional development, relational assets are important back-ups of institutional capabilities, networks, and community networks of cooperation (Kim and Lim 2017). Currently, NACDA has approximately 62 branches nationwide and in the diaspora (NACDA archives, 2017, Fonchingong C, 2013, 2017). Funding for development projects and other solidarity schemes comes from two major streams: Annual development levies (flat rate) and voluntary donations (table 1).

Table 1: Annual development levies by locality and gender

Locality	Amount	
	Men	Women
Village Residents	2,000 FCFA	1,000 FCFA
Residents within Africa	6,000 FCFA	3,000 FCFA
Diaspora (Europe, America and others)	20,000 FCFA	20,000 FCFA

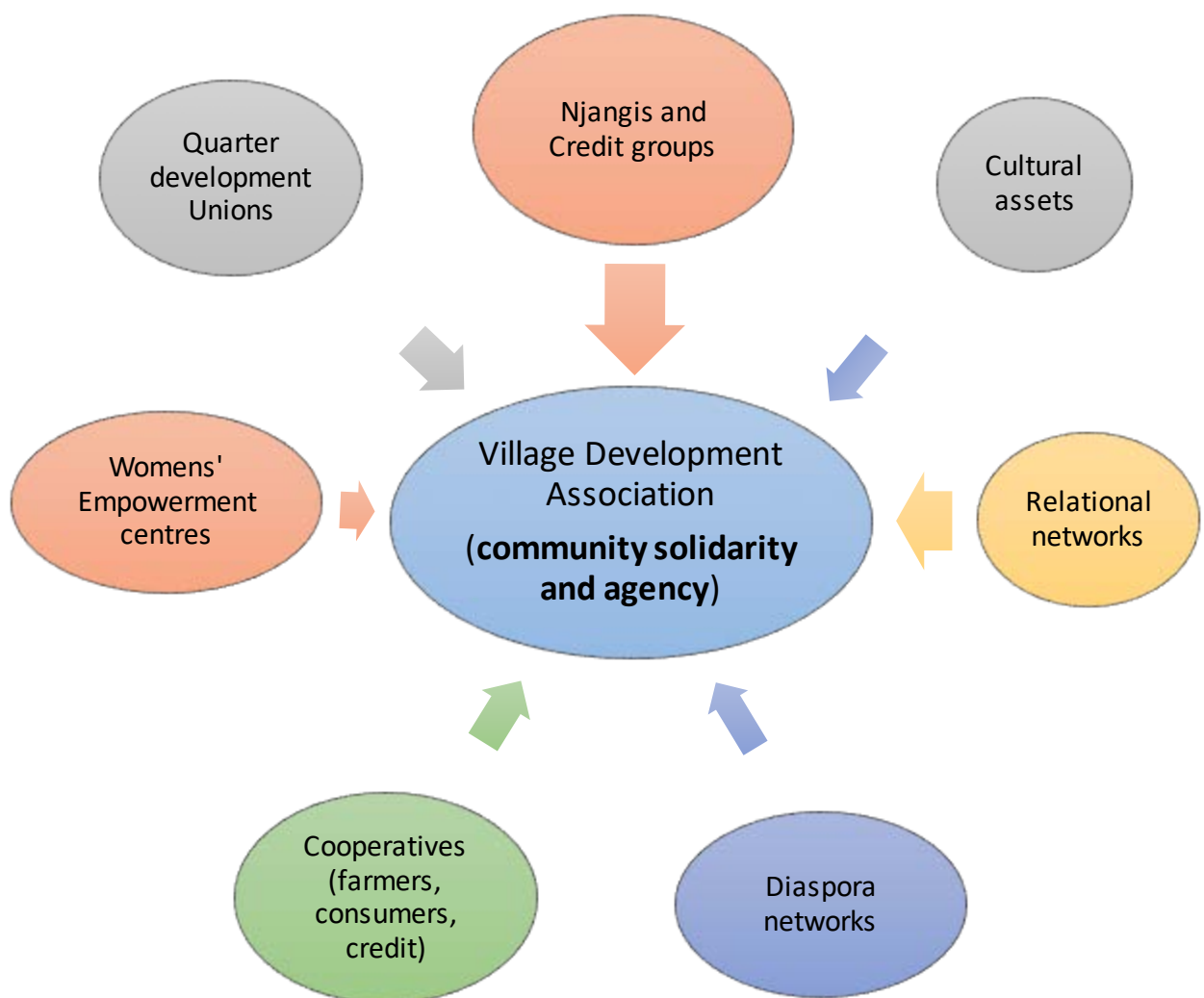
These levies which are constitutionally set can be amended during general assembly meetings. The amounts levied are collected in wards and branches and transmitted to central treasury of NACDA, who keep an annual inventory of those who have paid or not paid. Women’s empowerment is foremost on the agenda of VDAs. The NACDA constitution recognizes the creation of women’s wings and one third of development

levies sourced are set aside for women’s projects. The funds enable women to carry projects such as women empowerment centres, support with business ventures and farming, setting up cooperatives.

Tiered solidarity framework

Utilizing a layered solidarity framework to secure livelihoods for hard pressed families, whilst delivering social development needs of the community, remains a challenge for VDAs. Moving beyond a Marxist orientation of economic organization to building capable communities, based on local needs mapping represent a livelihood diversification strategy that recognize contextual realities (Chambers 2005). In tandem with the sustainable development goals, the yawning gaps in inequality and social justice can be addressed through exploring the interactions between the social economy and sustainable development (Hudon and Huybrechts, 2017). Cooperatives (farmer and consumer) are vital forms of resourcing, building capital assets and relational base for members as espoused in figure 1.

Figure 1- VDA tiered solidarity framework



Other relational networks cater for diverse interests of socio-economic groups and class such as women, youths, the elderly (Fonchingong, C. 2017). Cultural assets are the repository of indigenous resources masterminded by traditional authority with the Fon/Chief - head of pyramidal village power structure (Fonchingong, C. 2016). As exposed in fig 1, there are overlapping mechanisms of providing direct and indirect support for every member, under the canopy of the VDA. Cooperatives offer huge networks of support for production and exchange of goods and services with direct impact on livelihoods. A respondent summed this up: *'within our farming cooperatives, we do help one another during planting and harvesting, we rotate in terms of preparing the fields and we take turns to harvest the crops'*. Another said: *'cooperatives help us to pool our produce together, arrange transport of produce to local and urban markets; sales from our produce enable us to participate in other VDA activities'*.

Needs mapping

Needs mapping remains a contentious task for VDAs to pursue a livelihood strategy, as well as guarantee a positive developmental outcome for the community. Though there are perceived tensions in what constitutes a pressing need and how that pressing need impact on the wellbeing -both economically and socially. During a NACDA consultation exercise as indicated by a respondent, the renovation of the Fon's palace was deemed a pressing need by the VDA, however, community members had reservations as to its importance for ranked priority needs. The VDAs arguments conjectured the relevance of the palace as a communal habitat and sanctuary for the community, thus the epicentre of culture and a spatial symbol of community pride. One member stated: *'the palace is a gravitational force in social development and we as a community look up to it with a sense of pride and identity'*. However, others argued differently: *'I believe our pressing concern is having clean water, be able to have schools for our children and get teachers, pay and retain them'*. Such contentious positions render needs mapping complex, rekindles the debate on structure of SSE as spaces for decision making and deliberation in social development, against the backdrop of social justice and social inclusion (Alenda-Demoutiez and Boidin (2019). Seeking out viable community-based alternatives to addressing community needs has corresponded with the tenets of solidarity economics build on mutuality and the common good (Dash 2015). Too many demands on the system lead to fracturing; to shore up solidarity and the capability of communities requires constructive collaboration and re-alignment of different layers. A further factor to consider is the operational structures of VDAs that lends itself to relational networks in differential spatial contexts (figure 1).

Njangis (micro-credit) as core solidarity and relational asset

Relational networks such as *Njangis* (rotating credit associations) offer members the opportunity to raise seed funds for individual and collective projects in different spatial locations. Based on a layered framework and tiered structure as captured in figure 1, *Njangis* are predominant form of solidarity within VDAs. In the diaspora, *njangis* are a vital link and epicentre for generating cash among diaspora communities. Funds generated are ploughed back into individual and community projects touching on livelihoods and wellbeing to address personal and generic needs. A diaspora participant noted: *'njangis are an umbrella for us to gather, pool together resources and enable members to carry out individual projects. We equally raise funds and support development projects back in the homeland'. Equally, we hold diaspora assemblages annually and*

through the funds raised, we decide on how the money raised is spent liaising with the VDA president back home'. Such relational networks are vital solidarity platforms with direct and indirect benefits for members (Fonchingong 2017, 2018). It is averred that operating within localized circuits of production, exchange and consumption, SSE organizations and micro enterprises can be beneficial to not only basic needs provisioning but also local economic development (UNRISD & GSEF 2018). A participant captured the tangible benefits of solidarity assemblage in the diaspora:

'we have helped members solve big problems such as housing, funding and scholarships for higher education, immigration and asylum issues, childcare costs and assistance with childcare'.

Yet another stated: 'I have benefited from my njangi and solidarity network through assistance with cutting back on expenses for food; we buy food from wholesalers in bulk, usually at discounted prices, then we share amongst the group, this helps to bring down overall family food costs'.

Still, another participant stated: 'when we meet in our social events annually, usually during the summer, it is a good time to interact, share and discuss ideas on how we can move things forward. Usually the host cooks food from our local cuisine, and we can support with drinks. I cannot underestimate the health benefits and mental stability such reunion provides'.

The social benefits accruing from membership of njangis is immense. A participant stated: 'if not for our solidarity group, I should have had it difficult when I lost a family member. Everyone rallied even at short notice and pooled together contributions which enabled me to travel back home for funeral rites. Without this support, I would have struggled on my own'. Members also show up for other social events such as births, christening, graduations.

Some diaspora branches have compulsory life insurance schemes for members. This covers difficulties related to ill health, accidents and deaths. Part of the policy caters for repatriation of the corpse upon the death of a member. Though not much, funds are raised to support the family of the deceased. Similar schemes are prevalent in Latin America where governments are trying to shift responsibility for reducing poverty from the public sector to the poor themselves through forms of collective organization and microcredit programs (Bateman 2014). However, these opportunities are proving ineffective as they deepen the participants' dependency on short-lived programs without creating a firm handle for assuring basic needs (Barkin and Lemus 2014). Also, Njangis and micro-credit schemes constitute relational assets that are tapped by community members to address individual and community needs. Within the NACDA wards, there are social self-help groups that rely on njangi element as part of their solidarity dive (Fonchingong C. 2013, 2018). For example, in Yaoundé the capital city, there are 12 groups called 'Tax' distributed in table 2.

Table 2: Membership of 'Tax' solidarity groups in Yaoundé

Mimboman	20
Nkolmesseng	40
Ekonu	60
Mimboman	22
Mewoulou	39
Melen	110

Nkolbisson	68
Anupong-Fo'o	60
Tkc	85
Mewoulou	39
Chapelle-Obili	100
Carrier	34

Source: NACDA Executive (2018)

As part of the social groupings within different 'tax' wards, traditional dance groups and other micro social networks, are notable cultural assets that serve for cultural animation. Part of the njangi funds pooled in these schemes cover 'trouble funds', covering deaths, ill-health, unforeseen contingencies and emergencies (Fonchingong C, 2013, 2018). Self-help seminars are an integral part of Njangis and they provide a platform for information sharing on aspects such as employment, professional advice related to health, education, business and other key socio-economic concerns.

Rural/Urban spill over

In reaching out to hard to help and hard to reach populations, data emerging from the case study point to the rural/urban split. There are overlapping solidarity structures in different spatial locations catering for the needs of members. The focus of NACDA projects in rural areas are more generic community development ventures such as constructing schools, building bridges and maintaining roads, pipe borne water, health centres. Whilst the focus is on upgrading rural infrastructure, quarter development unions for community development. Also, members keep an eye on livelihoods through famer groups and cooperatives. In urban areas, projects centre on building community halls as a place of assemblage.

Projects implemented mitigate the challenges faced in urban settings related to business start-up funds, women's empowerment centres, youth employment support clubs, urban cooperatives for goods exchange and discounted transactions. Empowerment centres are a hub utilized by women to hone their skills, share ideas on marketing and learn new business and production strategies: A female participant stated: *'the empowerment centres is your place to share ideas on how we can expand our business; we also learn new skills and ways of doing things that will make our business grow. The centre gives us the opportunity to meet and know more on meal preparation, traditional dress making and tailoring and so on'*. It is averred (UNRISD & GSEF 2018) active involvement through SSE can have a significant impact on women's economic, social and political empowerment. Women's energies are unleashed when they collectively engage in enterprise ventures (Fonchingong, C. 2006, Mukherjee-Reed, 2015). Evidently, the patterns of production and consumption pursued by SSE organizations and enterprises tend to be more attuned to local environmental conditions, than those of for-profit enterprises (Kim and Lim 2017).

Social enterprise and stakeholder engagement

Consequently, the notion of social enterprise is vital to upscaling of solidarity economy in resource depleted communities. As testified by respondent's social enterprise offers a platform to revitalise incrementally the range of social and cultural networks deployed. One respondent said: 'we need to think big and how we can increase our share of capital so that we can better support each other and our community to thrive'. Nowhere more is solidarity embodied than in social enterprise where members are assured their

investments of time, resources and mutual support should pay off with dividends in the short and longer term. On the prospect of social enterprise, a respondent noted: *'we hope one day we can have a big farming cooperative that will sell our goods to international markets, which will give us more money to solve other pressing problems'*. The social enterprise and re-investment capacity of SSE are articulated in the Asian context. The case of South Korean SSEs is elucidating; based on sustainable production and consumption, fostered through core values and principles of democracy, solidarity and social cohesion with considerable potential to reduce inequalities (UNRISD & GSEF 2018).

In constructing a viable solidarity economy, participants indicated that mutual bonding and strengthening the solidarity vibes were crucial in pursuing common goals. This reinforces an outcomes-based and capability building approach of needs mapping and supporting community members tackle identified needs. A participant averred: *'we need to constantly look inside, help each other in the community and seek to continually build bridges of mutual help and assistance, that is the only way we can instil a spirit of common identity and vision'*.

A revitalization of the various cooperative ventures within the different layers and tiers of solidarity is crucial for mobilising scarce capital. Part of the challenge is to source for funds from external agencies and other organisations. Most participants stated that part of their solidarity drive was to link with external agencies to source for financial resources and expertise to implement various projects. Some diplomatic missions like the SWISS embassy, German Embassy and British High Commission offered technical expertise and cash injection for the completion of projects such as pipe borne water, health supplies and equipment for health centres and schools (Fonchingong C. 2018).

Constructing a social enterprise development model remains a huge challenge for VDAs. This would require a more streamlined approach and coordination of different tiers of solidarity which operate on an ad hoc basis in different spatial locations as indicated in figure 1. The development of cooperative structures through member shares and joint ventures with other private sector partners as visible in Latin American SSE could be a way forward for recapitalisation and sustainability of solidarity economy in resource constrained countries of SSA.

Co-production and private/public partnerships

Underpinning the foundation of solidarity is resourcing depleted communities, enabling members' livelihoods needs to be met, the issue of re-orienting the solidarity model attuned to contextual and spatial context raises important questions on what type of partnerships should exist with the private and public sector. Co-production involving public private partnerships have been touted as a possible alternative in joint-up working to produce better outcomes (Horne and Shirley 2009, Fonchingong, C. 2018) but in practice this can be problematic in terms of remit and resourcing. As captured from the interviews the state response to the demands of the community are often met with bureaucratic inertia and lethargy which stifles the implementation of projects (Fonchingong 2018). Others have argued that reclaiming solidarity economy requires social enterprise and face to face contact with communities; this offers more insights into their problems, enabling deeper understanding of the interface between individual and remote community issues that countervail sustainable development (Kim and Lim 2017).

Implications for policy and conclusion

This exploratory case study has made the case that current economic models of development have failed to address the yawning gaps in inequality in resource constrained communities. Solidarity economics championed by VDAs and NACDA showcased represent an opportunity for communities to redress social development imbalances. This involves tackling individual livelihood challenges, and other social problems besetting communities through the articulation of needs. Balancing needs-mapping against a resource-led approach is proving a herculean task. Though the multi-layered approach of needs mapping and agency is useful in embedding a sense of communal social justice and promoting solidarity vibes, however, this represents a barrier to effective take-off through enterprise development. Social policy and rural development planning have failed to connect with these forms of citizen mobilisation, and engagement in livelihoods improvement. The defining features of SSE are community centeredness and (UNRISD and GSEF 2018) geared towards community mutual based activities (Alenda-Demoutiez and Boidin, 2019). VDAs are also grappling with spatial context and variability in scope and distribution of solidarity networks between rural and urban areas. There is a possibility of disaggregated benefits for members with outcomes difficult to quantify. External agencies and other development agencies can engage in co-production of policies and deliverable outcomes mapped on the needs of the different solidarity networks under the operational framework of the VDA.

It is thus important for policy makers to calibrate a rural development policy that entails harnessing the strengths of solidarity economy encompassed in the operational framework of VDAs. Citizen and stakeholder engagement hold import to the tenets of solidarity, building on a climate of insurance and assurance for members who look up primarily to these networks as a means of securing livelihoods, then building on community capability as a final resort. In line with the Sustainable development goals (SDGs) in the 2030 agenda, specifically goals 1, 5, 9 and 16) alleviating poverty and reducing gender inequality, this hinges on mobilising resources for inclusive community and rural development that is sustainable. Attaining the 17 SDG goals and set objectives, it is critical that the execution process be anchored at the local level in terms of stakeholder priorities, democratic governance, available assets and possibilities for resource mobilization (UNRISD and GSEF 2018). The role of social workers and social welfare practitioners in helping communities filter through their needs cannot be ignored. Needs mapping through streamlined partnerships and joint-up working with other agencies, to usefully advocate and address the livelihoods and development concerns of these solidarity networks. Understanding the ecosystem, spatial realities, enabling resources to be effectively mobilised, and redistributed according to need will alleviate poverty, thereby lowering inequality.

Political realignment through effective decentralisation and co-production of policies between the state, VDAs and its intersecting solidarity structures, in partnership with multilateral development agencies and partners such as UNRISD, UNDP and European Union can build viable and sustainable solidarity networks. These partnerships would ensure needs mapping and community agency are aligned to livelihoods improvement on a sustainable footing. It is undeniable SSE has a political dimension with economic, social and environmental attributes; it involves forms of resistance, mobilization and active citizenship that can challenge the structures that generate social, economic and

environmental injustice (UNRISD & GSEF 2018). As evident with indigenous movements in Latin America, SSE has the potential to engage in forms of active citizenship, including objection and activism, to overcome structural and institutional constraints that undermine development (Dinerstein 2013).

More importantly, social services departments and social work practitioners should work closely with these organizations to help with needs mapping, build autonomy and resilience through promoting strengths-based outcomes, based on evidence-based analysis. Policy framing must take cognizance of the disruption that is likely to occur from the restructuring of VDAs, and other relational networks that feed into the solidarity framework in different spatial contexts. Providing enabling institutions and policies that are context and spatial specific and anchored on local economic needs and stakeholders is strategic to re-inventing local economic development (Bateman 2015, Fonchingong C. 2018).

Enabling VDAs to build a virtual online community will enhance aspects of social capital. The benefits of knowledge exchange and awareness generated through the online presence and ideas of members constitute a good recipe for sustainable development. If solidarity economics is to be rooted within communities, there is need to harness the benefits of a digital economy through visible online interaction. VDAs can use such platforms to calibrate vibes on social enterprise and policy development. Obviously, given the dynamics of sourcing for funds and revitalizing relational networks, either enabled or constrained by ecological factors, the tendency is for most activities and projects to be implemented as one-off and on a periodic basis. Ventures may be impacted depending on variability in scale, level of participation and viability of social relations that constrain VDA efforts for upscaling solidarity.

As an alternative economic paradigm, solidarity economics is anchored on the ability of communities to mutually tailor support for members. This is underpinned by shared identity, values, and an ethos of looking out for one another. Angling these assets are vital in building a resilient solidarity system that enables the empowerment of marginal groups such as women and youths (Fonchingong, C. 2006, 2018). An audit system built on quality assurance indicators, and monitoring of solidarity outcomes will be useful in keeping members assured and insured from unpredictable risks. However, the overlay of solidarity structures in different spatial locations which caters for diverse spatial challenges, potentially undermines the agency of VDAs in needs mapping and sustainable livelihoods improvement. VDAs create a platform for self-help, where social relationships are formed and strengthened, building trust, and reciprocity. Though members rely on annual development levies and njangis to build scarce financial resources, these forms of capitalisation are not sustainable, and on a long-term footing in meeting mapped needs. Social capital built on an incremental basis facilitates the engagement in social action to achieve a collective goal - the very essence of solidarity economics.

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