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Optimising Community-driven Development through Sage Tradition in Cameroon

Abstract

Powering community development requires a re-invention of traditional authority. This paper interrogates this proposition: how does sage tradition engender social resilience and what is the impact of traditional authority on the modern governance architecture? Sage tradition construed culturally as elder-led authority is anchored on wisdom and respect for elders - a pivotal asset in community development transactions. Informed by indigenous knowledge, social capital and asset-based concepts, an empirical account of strategic leadership by the elderly is proffered, uncovering indigenous governance in the North West Region, Cameroon. A pyramidal power structure validates village elders as key players in advancing social justice. They offer counsel, and arbitrate in community affairs; mobilize community members for infrastructure provision - community halls, equipping schools, digging roads, building bridges and supply of fresh water. Though elder esteemed traditions prove perfunctory, findings show communities are benefiting from the accumulated, incremental cultural assets factored into local development. The paper concludes that thriving cultural assets should be amalgamated through a policy drive that taps into the utility of traditional authority, in synergy with modern state institutions to bolster social development, address poverty and social inequality.

Keywords: Cultural Assets, Institution building, Traditional authority, Social capital, Village Elder

Introduction: Traditional Institutions and Elder-led Community Development

The Economic Commission for Africa (ECA 2007) aver that large segments of rural populations, the overwhelming majority in most African countries, continue to adhere principally to traditional institutions. This article argues that community-led development is buoyed by the dynamism of village elders, endorsed through the respect earned; their wealth of community knowledge and compliance with community mores to ensure social justice. The contribution of older people as carers, advisers, mediators, mentors and breadwinners, though invaluable (Help Age International 2009:1), is largely overlooked.

A parallel can be drawn on the viability of sage tradition in Africa with elder traditions in Asian countries. Notable examples in African culture are the Asante Kingdom and Asanteman

council in Ghana, Ibo village assembly in Eastern Nigeria, Eritrean village *baito* (assembly), *the gada* (age-set) system of the *Oromo* in Ethiopia; *Kikuyu* and *Masai* of Kenya, the Bafokeng and Zulu tribal council of South Africa. These institutions adhere to traditional governance, including settling disputes through the arbitration of village elders (Mengisteab 2003, Adem 2004, ECA 2007). Yet, a fuller understanding of the power interplay within these traditional institutions remains unexplored (ECA 2007). Whilst, the relevance of indigenous knowledge systems and practices are credited for steering social development (Eyong 2007, Kangalawe et al. 2014), yet, traditional authority have typically been disregarded in current political discussions on institution building. Part of the problem relates to the state machinery, which is not possible without bureaucracy; even pre-colonial African States had administrators whose functions are akin to that of bureaucrats today. Traditional institutions had chiefs as most respectable law enforcers (Kisangani 2009). The integration of indigenous knowledge and institutions is trumpeted as vital for sustainable use of land, and natural resources management (World Bank 1998, Kangalawe et al. 2014). However, the existing duality of formal institutions of the state and customary rules of traditional institutions, which govern the lives and livelihoods of large segments of Africa's population, remains problematic (ECA 2007, 2013).

Broadly, this paper questions the instrumentality of sage tradition in modern governance debates on revamping social development. Amid economic growth prospects, social welfare coverage remains a daunting policy challenge in Cameroon (Fonchingong C. 2014). Local governance is more nuanced; though Mayors are elected by local people; some councils practice participatory budgeting; overall, the context of local government is not clear-cut, marred by intrusive central government and competing traditional interests (Kofele-Kale 2011). Anchored on traditional governance, channelled through village development associations (VDAs), village elders are seen as pillars in mobilising scant resources for infrastructure provision (Fonchingong C. 2005). Uncovering the leverage displayed by elders in social development, this paper articulates the centrality of integrating traditional institutions into the modern governance architecture.

It is argued that sage tradition, anchored on indigenous precepts can build responsive governance, with a core strategy of resolving social inequality and poverty. Illuminating this narrative, Njoh (2014) situates the Meta clan of Cameroon, affirming that indigenous politico-administrative institutions are regaining their once lost allure. This paper go beyond to prosecute the argument that amid state lethargy in fulfilling its social development agenda, the usage of 'cultural power' and institutions can potentially fill gaps in governance, as village elders galvanize community members for local development. The key questions explored are: how is eldership construed culturally, how can sage tradition and respect for elders be channeled towards social development initiatives and what role can traditional institutions play in the modern governance architecture?

Theoretical Proposition: Indigenous knowledge, social capital and Asset-based Approach

In emerging economies, current debates around social development have relied on indigenous knowledge (ECA 2007, 2013, Eyong 2007, Mengisteab 2003, Kangalawe et al. 2014), building social capital as vital networks in community regeneration (Fonchingong 2005) and asset based approach (Mathie and Cunningham 2003, Burnell 2013, Ling and Dale 2014). Indigenous knowledge, social capital and a measured usage of community assets represents a possible

alternative, for progress among the world's rural poor, with the potential of re-fashioning social welfare and development. Proponents of remaking development (Escobar 1995, Briggs 2005) have advanced the relevance of teasing out the dynamics between communities and places (Herbert 2000). This spatial analysis entails listening to the poor, learning from them, respecting their realities and priorities (Chambers 1983), to improve livelihoods (Ellis 2000). Essentially, this paper corroborates these perspectives, highlighting indigenous governance, championed by village elders as a plausible recipe for social development. In addressing development concerns, incorporating traditional authority precepts in the modern governance architecture is critical. Drawing on the discourse of communitarianism, social capital and empowerment (Fonchingong 2005), the usage of cultural assets is vital for community regeneration, as citizens strategise to provide crucial infrastructure, without endlessly waiting on government (Fonchingong, C 2013). The concept of sage tradition draws on a contextual matrix that captures the role of elders from an African and non-African context. This matrix is aligned to the asset-based approach in community development, centring on forms of capital that may be social, cultural or symbolic - all critical in societal power relations (Bourdieu 1986), yet can be accumulated and transferred from one arena to another (Navarro 2006:17).

A critique of indigenous governance shows how flourishing cultural assets are rooted in local communities. A discursive linking of sage tradition with social development is attuned to the World Bank (2001) praxis of social capital; not imposed from above, but based on contextual realities. Communities in Africa value cultural traditions of eldership associated with 'natural wisdom'. In recognition of older people's wisdom and expertise, the social development Act for South Africa (2010: 443) urge the protection of elders' knowledge and skills, promote their active role and participation in community affairs. Sage tradition square with the tribal traditions, built on the experiences, deep respect and reverence with which ancestry is viewed (Mazrui 2001: 97); essential in influencing state and society interface in Africa.

Official attitudes towards local development initiatives in Cameroon square with government liberalisation policy and the resurgence of Common Initiative Groups, (CIGs) NGOs, and Credit Unions (Tanga and Fonchingong 2009), although sage tradition remains invisible, outside the confines of state regulation. The North West region, Cameroon is heralded for its self-reliant development initiatives, stimulated by rich cultural traditions of fondoms and chiefdoms (Fonchingong, C. and Fonjong 2002, Fonchingong C. and Ngwa 2005; Njoh 2014). Community development thrives on village elders building social equilibrium; an interviewee situates the vitality of sage tradition: *'Our elders are a storehouse of the community; they understand how it breathes; their knowledge of medicinal plants; archives of community issues point the way. Also, their wisdom and inspiring talk hold the community together'* (CP2). As custodians of tradition, the Fon/Chief at the helm of traditional authority is nested in 'sacred powers', working in tandem with other elders of traditional councils.

Such notions of cultural power tie up with asset-based approaches, built on the premise that people in communities organise to drive development, through identifying and mobilising existing (but often unrecognised) assets, that create local economic opportunities (Mathie and Cunningham 2003). This approach is expressed by Njoh (2014:1); he presents the Meta Clan as an acephalous polity, with autonomous chiefdoms and village-centric orientation markedly outperforming its modern counterparts, particularly based on outcome measures of good governance. The dynamics of contemporary social development reflects the efforts of all stakeholders in mobilising key resources and assets for community renewal. Sage traditions align with mainstream approaches on participatory development, (Botes and Van Rensburg 2000, Taylor 2007), involving leadership and dynamic participation. A participant captures this notion: *'Elders have natural wisdom that flow from their life experiences and interaction within society; it is an attribute that cannot be taught but can only be built over time. Its fruits are counted towards purposeful service to the community (CPI).*

The contours of sage tradition as outlined square with traditional institutions in Asia. Among the Jino clan of Yunnan China, each village is governed by a council of elders, formed by leaders of each clan, chaired by the *Zhuoba*, the tribal elder (Zheng 2008:50). Elders provide useful functions in the community; however, this has to be seen in the context of other services provided by the state such as national security, education, transport, communication infrastructure, regulations and other matters of social development. Hase (2013:82) corroborates this narrative; looking at county gentry and village elders in rural China. Village elders are advisers of County magistrates in undertaking customary duties, land allocation and tax collection responsibilities. Equally, Parnini and Othman (2014:38) argue that the panchayat institutions, visible in rural areas of India and Bangladesh respond to people's needs, leading to empowerment of the poor, through synergy with state to enhance people participation. Traditional village leaders (*matbar*) deal with small-scale village disputes in village meetings (*salish*). Complicated issues are dealt with by the union (*upazila*), council members (*parishad*) and political leaders.

As espoused in the theoretical literature, indigenous knowledge, social capital and asset based approaches underpin the core elements of sage tradition. Village elders are perceived as 'builders' and 'pillars' of communities drawing on their perceived wisdom, experiences, knowledge of traditional institutions, expertise and 'traditionally revered' status. With focus on case studies in North West Region of Cameroon, I unpick the core narratives on sage tradition, stressing its usefulness in institution building. In resolving the community's unmet needs, village elders grapple with community cohesion, adjudicate on community matters, initiate development projects and respond to the specific needs of women and non-indigenes.

Research Methodology and Context

Geographically, Cameroon is located in central Africa, renowned for its strong indigenous knowledge systems and governance structures that revolve around chiefs, Fons, Sultans, council of elders, and other social structures (Eyong 2011). Cameroon's population is estimated at over 21 million, with the North West, one of ten regions, home to a population of over 1.8 million inhabitants. Cameroon is ranked 150th on the Human Development Index (HDI), with corruption identified as a major stumbling block to social development (IMF 2013, World Bank 2013). Cameroon's welfare regime is abysmally inadequate with government spending just 0.2% of

GDP on social safety nets-one of the lowest in Africa, coupled with a dysfunctional bureaucracy, marred by dithering (Fonchingong, C. 2014). The flawed decentralisation agenda does not provide leverage for local government to deliver expected services in a regular and efficient manner (Mbuagbo 2012). To mitigate shortfalls in welfare, informal institutions exist to compensate for gross social difference, but are limited in scope and quality. In rural areas, social risk is still largely off-set by traditional, community and socially oriented, family-based relationships of solidarity and mutual support (Fonchingong, C. 2014).

The North West region is renowned for its mosaic of cultural traditions, vitality of traditional institutions, structured around fondoms and chiefdoms (Geschiere 1993, Njoh 2014). Building and mobilising resources taps into community voices; eliciting views within the community. Based on empirical accounts generated; I employ a qualitative, comparative case study critique. My case study approach is informed by notions of indigenous development, amplified by asset-based community development framework espoused by Ellis (2000) and Mathie and Cunningham (2003). They emphasize strengths in using locally generated assets within communities as a means for sustainable development. For Ellis (2000), community building projects are the mass of spatial practice that produce a set of desired outcomes for members. Through such relationships, assets can be transferred and traded with livelihoods strategically constructed. The case study approach resonates with Moser (2009:18), who underscores the importance of social assets (reciprocity and trust embedded in social relations, social structures, rules, norms). Asset based approaches unearth the development needs of the community through nurturing its strengths and resources (McLean 2011).

In order to understand the research context, this qualitative study used semi structured interviews. The data collection process generated empirical data, informed by key propositions. Out of 25 respondents interviewed, three opted to respond by email. A time span of 45 minutes to an hour was given for interviews. Semi structured interviews covered the period June to December 2014; interviewees were interrogated on the workings of sage tradition. The VDAs chosen for the study were: The Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association, Meta Cultural and Development Association (MECUDA), Bafut Development and Cultural Association (BADECA), Mankon Cultural and Development Association (MACUDA). These community organizations are known for successfully engineering community development projects (Fonchingong C, 2005, 2013). In analysing the data gathered, key themes uncovered the conceptions, perceptions of sage tradition, scrutinizing traditional governance mechanisms by village elders and the challenges faced within a multiparty political context.

Data obtained was thematically analyzed and cross-checked with follow-up interviews and emails. Respondents were randomly selected from community members and officials of selected VDAs. In eliciting information, a string of exact questions included: what constitutes sage tradition/eldership, what are the expectations of sage tradition and its place in traditional authority, how is sage tradition deployed for the benefit of the community, have you been a direct beneficiary of sage tradition and what was the outcome? Also, what aspects of sage tradition has been the most/least beneficial to the community? Other questions probed: how do community members in the Diaspora enforce aspects of sage tradition? Interviewees were asked to identify any corrupt practices, associated with sage tradition and its impact on social and

community development. Further, how can village elders have a greater say in local and national development concerns. In exploring the application of traditional authority, interviewees were asked if they would advocate for the inclusion of traditional authority in modern state governance. The researcher was detached from the interviewees and contacts made with identified respondents to facilitate data collection. The interview process was explained, consent sought and obtained from all participants. There was no potential conflict of interest or bias as the relationship between the researcher and the respondents was clarified from the outset and anonymity guaranteed.

Data gleaned from the interviews were content analysed, with emergent themes based on concrete and contextual experiences. From the neutral questions, a pyramidal tier of traditional authority and governance is proposed (figure 1). Drawing on cultural and social capital, the narrative of maximising indigenous knowledge ties up with Burnell's (2003) small change asset approach; with culture perceived as a valuable resource in building social resilience among community groups. Equally, cultural action can unlock existing assets in communities to bring about change. The opportunities and challenges for achieving development through cultural action complement the discourse on cultural capital and community development. Within deprived socio-economic communities, this task can be more challenging as people struggle with practical know-how, capacity and networks that help secure and run assets (Stott 2011).

Findings and Discussion

Empirical data point to indigenous knowledge in local development as a key construct. Eldership is constructed on cultural resilience. A respondent stated: *'whilst old age is perceived as bordering on a life journey, the traditional mindset of what constitutes a village elder is culturally constructed; age is not only what is on one's birth certificate but what meaning the community attaches to it'* (CP3). Connections are drawn between sage tradition and elders with village elders perceived as: *'key decision makers, life and soul of community', 'custodians of culture, history and traditions, 'giving out wise words', 'growing in community stature all the time', 'displaying cultural leverage', 'showing tenacity and measured approach in managing community affairs', 'showing bravado and doable attitude towards community building gained from lived experiences'*. These notions reflect observations by Ling and Dale (2014:17): *'communities which enhance the opportunities for individuals to develop personal security, confidence, skills and technical capacity on the one hand, networks and social capital on the other, will be better able to develop resiliency and adaptability, ensuring the community maintains vitality and develops in a sustainable way'*.

Sage tradition is construed culturally as the ability to stimulate community development: *'age is not a matter of birth register, your biological age. It is your ability to do good for the community'* (CP12). Another held: *'Eldership represents candour displayed for community; the ability to animate community affairs. Elders build community resilience by steering project*

committees in the face of difficulties and threats to project completion' (CP4). *'Our elders build confidence, trust and supportive community relations during bad and good times. They handle domestic violence and other family disputes in a spirit of reconciliation'* (CP3). Such attributes tie up with social and human assets or capital that can be accumulated, including increased self-confidence and sense of self-worth, strengthened community co-operation and social networks (social capital) and a greater sense of self-reliance (Matarasso 2007, Taylor 2007).

Whilst village elders entrench community values and build cohesion, infrastructure development is uppermost on the agenda: *'the services regularly considered for eldership include leadership in community development projects, dispute resolution, financial contributions towards listed projects, organizing health, sanitation and clean-up campaigns'* (CP1). Drawing on ancestral traditions is crucial in cementing community norms: *'The Fon's duty as the community's spiritual, hereditary and ancestral leader is without question and the palace acts as an umbrella to shield all, providing social assistance and social insurance'* (CP11). Community cohesion is fundamental in successful completion of projects; village elders entrench community values through fair decisions and counsel. Utilizing these experiences, elders arbitrate in customary courts on matters that dislocate community relations: *'Disputes related to land, inheritance, farmer/grazier conflicts, food security and other issues like social security, health hazards; deemed to threaten life and blood of the village are dealt with'* (CP2).

The value base is instilled through a village code of conduct (*mbom allah/ country fashion*), with traditional norms and a template of good behaviour derived from sage tradition. In some localities, such norms extol deep respect for elders, stipulate good family relations. Also, high on the agenda is a moralisation drive - building virtues of good, supportive community relations. An interviewee succinctly echoed this notion: *'our elders are senior citizens of the community. Everyone has to abide by the community values of respect for elders. Such gestures pave the way for a healthier community in return'* (CP16). Another said: *'elders and community have a shared vision in managing resources, environment, forests, flora and fauna. It leads to common good; if our natural resources are not properly managed, this can sink the entire community. For the community to use its natural resources wisely, elders show leadership by dealing with important environmental concerns'* (CP24). Controversial family concerns such as domestic violence, witchcraft, sorcery are dealt with by elders within traditional councils, quarter/wards, and regents (figure 1). Other concerns that cannot be resolved within the wards are escalated to the village traditional council.

Apart from arbitration and counsel visible in customary courts; elders champion the completion of major development projects. Community members mentioned projects such as the construction of palaces, schools, community halls, pipe borne water, community health centres and clinics, village market stalls, village electrification, communal roads, bridges and culverts, information technology centres. In building social resilience, interviewees mentioned interventions such as land litigation cases, family dispute resolution along the dictates of

customary law, tailored support for deprived groups, orphans, widows and widowers. Other projects executed include community halls, scholarship funds and essential materials to support children schooling. Partnerships are explored like the case of the Awing pipe borne water supply completed with support from the Swiss embassy in Cameroon. Interviewees flagged up linkages with Diaspora communities, central in mobilising members overseas to make financial contributions and their expertise. Funds dispatched are re-directed towards the renovation/equipment of schools, rehabilitation of roads and health centres.

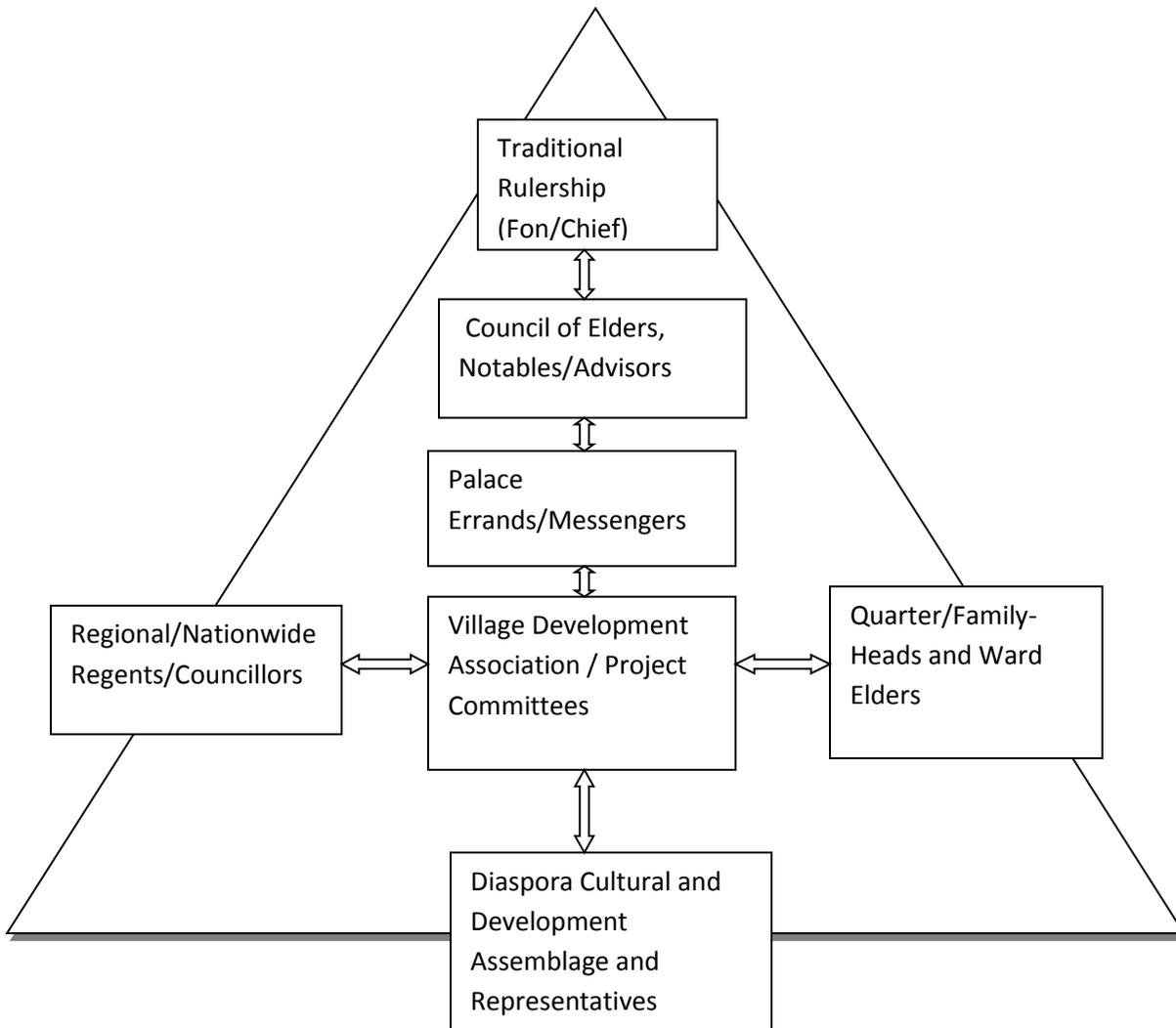
Building trust and accountability are important in enforcing community compliance. An interviewee posits: *'since our village elders are the eyes and ears of the community, they occupy a vantage position. Their comportment is often unquestionable; they provide leadership in handling family disputes; promoting fundraising, mobilising resources and communal accountability to provide support for orphans, widows, widowers'* (CP13). This bottom-up approach enables people to design their own development priorities and participate in shaping their destiny (Ghosh 2014). Such an approach is amplified by elders providing the direction of travel for social development. As disclosed by a respondent: *'our elders reach decisions by consensus in consultation with community traditional hierarchy and other advisors in accordance with customary law which leads the way'* (CP6). Conceptually, the community is a place with social bondage (Goe and Noonan 2007: 455), enhanced by agreed precepts.

Precepts of Traditional Authority and People-centred Development

Crucial in legitimising social development are precepts of indigenous governance powered by village elders, particularly Fons and chiefs. In exercising cultural power, elder-led councils provide direction on important community issues (figure 1). Elders also deal with gender relations and tackling concerns of non-indigenes. As indicated in interviews, customary courts handle land disputes, boundary issues, estate management, inheritance and gender related concerns. An interviewee summed up the task of handling gender concerns: *'we understand that women are still not very influential in traditional decision making. In our locality, we have the Queen mother (eldest of Fon's wives) who has royal duties and power to listen to female folk and factor in their concerns; the Fon/Chief and other notables rely on information and advice passed on by the queen mother'* (CP5).

Sequel to fostering good community relations, ward elders (figure 1) ensure the needs of non-indigenes (strangers), particularly disputes over land, allocation of farming plots are considered. These interventions uphold communal values of social justice as disputes are resolved without undermining community cohesion and solidarity. Upon consultation with the chief, village elders are culturally mandated to work in project committees and development associations, thereby guaranteeing positive outcomes for the community; counting on traditional agency and incremental cultural assets, mobilised within and beyond the polity. Such agency as affirmed by Ling and Dale (2014) refer to individuals, an organization, networks or a community process that drives change – either in a context of an individual who effects change within a community or collectively as a group.

Figure 1: Typical Pyramidal Structure of Sage Tradition and Traditional Governance



As captured in figure 1, different tiers of traditional governance are employed by elders. Traditional rulership is orchestrated through Fons/Chiefs and other layers of eldership; considered as apex of community traditional power. Leveraging social development rests on providing guided leadership and counsel. Community members are also motivated to give back to the community through manual labour, project materials and their expertise. The traditional governance framework espoused (figure 1) is akin to the Meta tribe, Cameroon. According to Njoh (2014), the chiefdom takes the shape of a pyramid with the chief at the zenith. The rung below the Fon is occupied by members of his inner circle of advisors (*Mukum*). These advisors are usually older than the chief and most likely have participated in his selection and coronation.

Family heads (*Etu-Minebi*) occupy the rung below that of the Fon's inner circle of advisors. Another rung is occupied by palace pages or errand-men (*Nchindas*). The bottom rung is occupied by the palace entertainers (*Mogwei*). These officials have a specific role or duty to perform, detailed rights, obligations, responsibilities, and scope of authority. In addition, each position in the chieftaincy is filled by individuals who have undergone extended periods of (albeit informal) apprenticeship (Njoh 2014:5).

Traditional titles and other accolades are conferred on community members who have made immense contributions. For example, the MECUDA through its Diaspora regents, commend members of exemplary character in furthering the course of community development. An interviewee notes: *'for my commitment to Meta culture and development efforts in the Diaspora, I was conferred the traditional title "Ikaifon" which means 'light of the Fon' (village head)* (CP1). The efforts acclaimed range from financial injections, advice and counsel, provision of expert knowledge, physical/manual labour, sourcing for funds, engaging in cultural festivities. A higher tier of contribution involves village elite lobbying for funds from central government, chasing up implementation of 'promised' development packages. Heads of VDAs link up with the Fon/Chief to make sure projects are successfully implemented (Fonchingong, C 2013). In a cultural visit to take stock of community affairs, the Fon of Bafut whilst communing with his 'subjects' of the South West region, Cameroon, installed regents (*Atancho*) to mobilise resources towards construction of the *Bafut Development Manjong House*. The funds collected and pledged at the occasion totalled 1.8 million FCFA (about \$3,000) (www.postnewslines.com).

Discussion and Policy Implications

Emergent policy implications point to elders as gatekeepers in social development. I engage with policy discussions, situating how sage tradition can be factored into policy documents including the constitution, and how deficits can be remedied. In scrutinizing policy, elders filter the voices of community members and other strands within the community. Consequently, deploying indigenous mechanisms of governance is crucial in advancing social development. Integrating these parallel institutions of governance so they can complement each other (ECA 2007) is critical for institution building and project implementation.

Amid the polarised multi-party context, marred by identity and ethnic hegemony (Fonchingong, C 2005), integrating sage tradition remains onerous, though elders are perceived as a culturally progressive force. This perception matches with the House of chiefs and elders, an institution that existed in colonial Cameroon under British protectorate. The British tended, at least formally, to respect the chief's dignity and their prerogatives (Geschiere 1993:153). In the long run, the trappings of multi-party politics are obstructive of sage tradition. The political elite use village associations as a stepping stone for their vested political interests (Fonchingong, C 2013), thereby compromising the neutrality of village elders. A community member flagged up the destabilising impact: *'some of our Fons and elders have been co-opted into party politics, they militate in the ruling party and this undermines community relations leading to scattered allegiances among community members'* (CP9).

The ambivalence surrounding traditional institutions (chiefs), whose power stem from local forms of cultural organization, but in many respects, depend on the modern state can result in confusing development (Geschiere 1993:152). There are mixed feelings amongst community members as per the inclusiveness of sage tradition: *'some young people careless about community norms and respect for elders, others do not associate in meaningful ways'* (CP8). Another indicated: *'the culture of respect for elders may lead to complacency and can breed authoritarian rule'* (CP10&CP7).

Still, another stated: *'when elders hold a viewpoint on something, it is hard to convince them to change course, also, though we value our customary law, arbitrary fines and procedures in resolution of land and other disputes by elders leads to distrust'* (CP23).

Gender underpins elderly relations; although the views of elderly women are harnessed within strictly female enclaves, the role played by elderly women is deemed peripheral. An interviewee said: *'though we have 'nkeum mengye' (crown title for Fon's senior wife in Awing) who look into women's concerns, women are rarely consulted and do not have a major say in key decision making due to male dominance in village governance structures'* (CP4). Women's agency as paragons of conflict and peace promoters in family and community (UNESCO 2003:8) should be recognised in decision making.

Elderly interventions are not homogenous within localities due to competing interests. On the subject of contributed funds for projects, a respondent indicated: *'we are not sure if our funds are properly managed, there are cases of village elders meddling and money contributed is unaccounted for at times. Corrupt practices have delayed the completion of major projects, coupled with empty promises'* (CP10). Evidently, elder respect on a whole seems to be declining and respect for sage tradition appears subdued in some communities. However, the esteemed cultural resource of seeking counsel from elders can be reactivated when needed (Adem 2004). Chiefs and village heads under civil chieftaincy as Von Throtha (1996) notes constitute a forum where local interests are debated and articulated.

Corrupt practices and the mismanagement of contributed funds for earmarked projects are recurrent concerns (Fonchingong, C 2005, Njoh 2014). Women's voices are not adequately factored into the workings of sage tradition. Though women's specific concerns are addressed through the inclusion of female representatives, this is undertaken in an adhoc manner. Gender concerns and other hurdles can inhibit community participation (Botes and vans Rensburg 2000). The selective participation and conspicuous absence of women; gate-keeping by local leaders, unchecked influence of elders can be counter-productive; paternalism and prescriptive role of the state are documented (Njoh 2002:242-243). As a corollary, African politics is beset with occupants of high office, who are not necessarily the more experienced or wisest, but almost invariably, the most powerful elite (Adem 2004:15). Ideally, the revitalization of sage tradition, rooted in decentralized governance can be beneficial, if well managed, taking into cognisance gender and concerns on social justice and inequality.

Furthering social development hinges on promoting social justice and equality of opportunity. Constitutional changes recognising a mix of traditional and modern governance could address the concerns of exclusion felt by community members. From the empirical accounts, the formation of a Community Development Council of Elders (CDCE) is proposed. Cameroon's senate and constitutional council can benefit from the input of the council of village elders with expertise in community driven development. Such a council can provide advocacy and provide a platform for sharing best practices on social development. The council can also serve as an arena to discuss workable development models, enable the design, implementation and audit of social development projects. Proposals from the forum can serve as a blueprint for institution building and a social development strategy for infrastructure provision.

Recognising the expertise of village elders in the modern governance apparatus is critical. A practical policy perspective could be a consultation process and incubation of ideas on key development projects. In the Diaspora, the expertise of community regents and Fon's representatives who act as a proxy to indigenous governance should be filtered. These representatives are seen as the *'eyes and ears of the traditional authority overseas'* (CP6). Given the Fon/Chief hold esteemed cultural power, his representatives *'draw upon values imbued in this sacred position'* (CP20). A village notable stated: *'Fons are considered traditionally to hold wisdom that is sacred and sacrosanct. Working in consultation with village elders, they provide counsel in arbitration of community issues'* (CP5). In pushing forward community development ventures, Diaspora regents oversee, organise cultural assemblies, source for project funds and support the executives in Diaspora jurisdictions. Such regents are mandated to confer traditional titles on designated community members who have vigorously applied themselves in promoting community development. The pyramidal power structure (figure 1) represents a model of indigenous governance, wherein traditional authorities delegate power. This enables designated emissaries to oversee community affairs locally, nationally and overseas.

Lobbying for projects from central government and seeking out partnerships are other key interventions. Village elders and political elite in particular, draw on their connections to lobby government ministers and diplomatic officials for development funds. This could take the form of preparing proposals for funding from partner agencies. A case in point is the Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association (NACDA), partnered with the Swiss Embassy in Cameroon to deliver clean drinking water in Awing village (Fonchingong, C 2013). Traditional authorities are potentially well-placed to support government efforts in service delivery through collaboration in dispensing justice, mobilizing human and financial resources for expanding educational and health services. This strategy has traction with the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) concept of "African solutions to African problems", and the principle of anchoring development on Africa's resources and resourcefulness of its people (ECA 2007).

Calibrating partnerships between traditional and government-appointed administrators through creation of regional development assemblies is vital in policy revamp. This is likely to

promote collaborative state-society relations that are solely absent in Africa (ECA, 2007). Traditional rulers at the helm of village power straddle geographic spaces to advance social development drives by connecting with kith and kin through visits overseas. On the invite of Awing indigenes, the Fon of Awing Village visited the United States of America (2014) to strengthen Village-Diaspora links and explore partnerships. At the grassroots level, chiefs often act primarily as facilitators, preside over a consensual decision making process with elders of their communities (ECA 2007). The ambivalent tension between tradition and being modern constitutes two simultaneous, but potentially, contrasting registers of legitimacy (Kleist 2011).

Building good gender relations is an integral component of social development. Injecting the views of women elders is vital in up-scaling development initiatives. Though elderly women such as the queen mother exist for projecting women's voices, her authority remains marginal. Factoring in women's concerns in traditional councils and regional assemblies is vital in sustaining a cultural momentum for community development. ECA (2007) recognizes that capable democratic states must be grounded on indigenous social values and contexts, while adapting to changing realities. Obstacles to popular participation should be identified and overcome (ECA 2013).

Conclusion

This paper has laid out the role of village elders and policy change within Cameroon. The resourcefulness of village elders in social development is underlined, anchored on indigenous governance mechanisms. The mix of traditional means of community authority, characterized as sage tradition with modern means of governance show deference for the history of a society. Drawing on conceptual ideas of indigenous knowledge, social capital and asset-based approaches, I have argued that elders are pivotal in building social resilience and advancing social justice. Integrating these traditional institutions into modern governance architecture constitute a policy conundrum. As gate-keepers, elders hold cultural power, and this power is put at the service of the community enabling compliance. From a policy angle, the state should engage better with village elders as partners in social development. Interventions by elders should be entrenched in the constitution, with legislative performance aligned to a robust social development policy that works to tackle social welfare inequalities. Traditional institutions can act as a buffer to the bureaucratic state apparatus. As elders push for legitimacy, there is need for an evidence-based policy rethink to embed benchmarks from sage tradition with deliverable outcomes mapped into a social development strategy. This is heightened by the polarised political context, wherein the controversial positioning of elders, as they jostle for collaboration with state officials, to address development concerns, is seemingly challenging. In optimising social development, sage tradition and its layers of traditional governance should be incorporated into the modern governance architecture. Institution building and calibrated implementation of development projects, building on the potential of all stakeholders, including women, non-indigenes and Diaspora communities to address poverty and social inequality is crucial.

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