The political complexity of pro-poor policy processes in the Mandara Mountains, Cameroon[1]

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Abstract: We give more conceptual flesh and bones to the interconnections between social structures and individual agency by focusing on the way in which the people(s) inhabiting the Mandara Mountains in Far North province of Cameroon have been affected by pro-poor policy processes. We analyze the role of individual, collective and relational capabilities in such processes. The case-study points to (i) the importance of tracing capability deprivations back to weak political agency, (ii) the sometimes ambiguous impact of participatory procedures and (iii) the necessity to balance the "what" and the "how" questions in designing anti-poverty interventions.

Key words: political capabilities, agency, participation, pro-poor policies, Cameroon.

Collective agency and political capabilities

The intellectual history of the concept of "collective capabilities", like that of many scientific concepts, begins with some "points of clarification" (Sen, 2002, p. 85). In his reply to the claim by Evans (2002) that achieving individual capabilities depends on collective capabilities, Sen points out that we should make a distinction between "socially dependent individual capabilities" and genuinely collective capabilities. In between the examples Sen provides, one finds a definition of the latter as *something which is not within any individual's capability to achieve*. In Sen's interpretation, Evans claims that most individual capabilities are simply socially dependent, i.e. "satisfactions that *occur in...* an individual's life, but in terms of causal connections, they *depend* on social interactions with others" (2002, p. 85, emphasis in original). However, Evans's argument is rather that the way in which

this social context (on which individual capabilities depend) works for (or against) the less privileged is in turn dependent on "messy and continuous involvement of the citizenry" (2002, p. 55), through collective action by political and civil society organisations. His claim is that this kind of civil society involvement is clearly *not individually achievable by the less privileged.*

The debate over the importance of collective capabilities as part and parcel of the capability approach must be situated against the background of Sen's definition of development as "a process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy. In this approach, expansion of freedom is viewed as both (1) *the primary end* and (2) *the principal means* of development" (1999, p. 36). The difficulty with this statement is that the "end" of freedom is understood, by Sen, at the level of the individual, whereas, if we take serious the importance of collective action in social change, the "means" of attaining freedom are to be understood primarily at a supra-individual level. If indeed "structures of living together…are responsible not only for the conditions of life of individuals today but have also affected past generations and will affect future ones" (Deneulin, 2006, p. x), it is crucial to understand how these structures evolve and change through time, and, eventually, to look at the "collective capabilities" such structures may or may not have in affecting individual livelihoods.

Yet, beyond the "specific, effectively resourced capacities" particular agencies can deploy in actual circumstances (O'Neil, 2001, p. 189), there is a further issue of the differential capabilities of people to influence the way in which such collective capabilities *are* actually deployed. We can make use here of the concept of Whitehead and Gray-Molina refer to as *political capabilities*, i.e. the "institutional and organizational resources as well as the collective ideas available for political action" (2003, p. 32). There are perhaps two distinct reasons to focus on political capabilities. Whitehead and Gray-Molina themselves emphasize the *instrumental* reason; they argue that "a focus on the policy-making process rather than individuals or organizations attempts to capture the political mechanisms by which actors become agents involved in deciding, lobbying, deliberating, and negotiating on pro-poor outcome" (2003, p. 33). But the fact that political capabilities constitute an important part of people's *agency* is itself *intrinsically* valuable as well (Sen, 1999).

In line with these insights, we seek to give more conceptual flesh and bones to the interconnections between social structures and individual agency by exploring the following propositions:

(i)   Political capabilities imply relational commitment by individuals.

Political capabilities as defined by Whitehead and Gray-Molina are different from Sen's "participatory capabilities" or "political freedoms" at the individual level (Sen, 1999). In their view, the drivers of pro-poor policy-making are constituted by three elements: the institutional characteristics of the state, (determining individuals' participatory capabilities and political freedoms), the content of pro-poor policy-making itself and poor people's organizational resources, "through which broad-based alliances of the poor and non-poor mobilize and frame their political action vis-à-vis the state" (2003, p. 33). Appadurai refers to the latter element by describing *voice* as a cultural capacity, not just a democratic virtue, "because for voice to take effect, it must engage in social, political, and economic issues in terms of ideologies, doctrines, and norms which are widely shared and credible, even by the rich and powerful… There is no shortcut to empowerment. It has to take some local cultural form to have resonance, mobilize adherents, and capture the public space of debate" (Appadurai, 1993, pp. 66-67). As a result, the focus on the political capabilities of the poor must go beyond questions of institutional design and include an analysis of the way in which pro-poor political action is framed and reframed through alliances with the non-poor. Depending on history and actual circumstances, poor and non-poor people may align themselves along ethnic, regional, religious, gender, professional, nationalistic or other cleavages and push forward a pro-poor agenda under the guise of a broader kind of injustice supposedly affecting the poor and the non-poor alike (Hickey & Bracking, 2005). It is at this point that the "poor" can notwithstanding achieve political voice.

Together, the characteristics of the state, the content of policy making and people's organisational resources constitute the drivers of pro-poor policy processes in a particular society. All types of capabilities come together here: political freedoms and civil rights are socially dependent individual capabilities, as Sen would define them. The design of a particular policy can in turn be categorised as a purely collective capability. But political capabilities as defined above are to be situated somewhere in between both. What an individual can do politically depends on the way in

which s/he relates to others. Political capabilities remain spurious capabilities at the individual level as long as the individual has not *identified* herself at one side of a socially recognised boundary. The carrier of the capability is neither the individual nor a fixed collectivity, rather an evolving relationship. Indeed, political agency, as human agency in general, depends crucially upon the capacity to enrol other human beings in one's "projects" (Long, 2001, p. 17), but this enrolling others overlaps with being enrolled oneself. In an interdependent world, agency freedom is not "given", and people must actively engage in social practices to realize it. In the words of the German sociologist Georg Simmel:

> Freedom is not a solipsist being but a sociological doing, not a state in which an individual finds himself in but a state of relatedness, however freely engaged in from the perspective of the individual… Within our relationships, freedom shows itself as a continuous process of liberation (Simmel, 1907, p. 57).

(ii)   Political agency has to do with voice, exit, and the whole range of actions in-between.

Though Whitehead and Gray-Molina complicate the political process by complicating the concept of political capabilities, they continue to assume that "national and subnational politics in new democracies with reasonably stable boundaries and relatively coherent systems of public policy-making and implementation" (2003, p. 33). More often than not, however, there is no central political place or time where and when societies make up their minds, carefully weighing different values against each other. It is futile to search for a central core "where the ballgame is being played", since:

> In many third world countries, many ballgames may be played simultaneously. In web-like societies, although social control is fragmented and heterogeneous, this does not mean that people are not being governed; they most certainly are. The allocation of values, however, is not centralised. Numerous systems of justice operate simultaneously. (Migdal, 1988, p. 39)

Concomitantly, policy-making is a complex and continuous process involving different actors interacting at different moments and at different places. One way to proceed from here is to think of any social arrangement in terms of three intertwined but analytically distinct layers: All social

arrangements can be described as nodes of social networks, as a set of rules and as "political arenas" where these rules are permanently questioned, doubted, contested, imposed, deflected and accepted (Bastiaensen *et al.*, 2005). To begin with, social arrangements do not form in a social void; people do not meet in a random fashion. To the extent different factors, varying from physical distance to the way in which space and time is socially organized, already pattern social interaction in particular ways, social encounters are on the contrary already to a certain extent "arranged" even before they materialize. Thus, people's entitlements do not only depend on the rules of the games they play, they also depend on the networks they are involved in. Further, there is some value in the view that politics is not so much located in "separate" institutions as in a separate layer surrounding *any* institutional arrangement. Politics is present anywhere where social actors interact on common issues (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1997, p. 240).

According to this view, political capabilities must be assessed not only in terms of the effective voice people have at particular moments concerning a particular decision. The ability of actors *not* to act, to remain silent or to go along with someone else's proposal at some particular occasion need not be understood as contrived agency: it should be understood rather in terms of what Agarwal called *covert behavior* (Agarwal, 1997), action in alternative but related settings which can partly deflect or redress the inequitable result of the public transcript in a particular arena (Scott, 1990).

To conclude this section, by focusing on improved opportunities for participation and voice to engage the hitherto disadvantaged or disenfranchised in the political process'' (Bardhan, 2002) we necessarily opt for a more qualitative understanding of the production of poverty and of the possibilities of poverty reduction. If voice has to take some local form to capture the public space of the debate, as Appadurai claimed, our thinking about opportunities for voice and exit must develop a local sensitivity too, voice and exit strategies cannot be detached from the local context in which individuals are embedded. To be sure, Sen himself does anything but deny the importance of social arrangements in enabling people to do and be what they have reason to value. He does emphasize the "quintessentially social" character of people (Sen, 2002, p. 81). Ultimately, however, he

conceptualizes individuals as separate from the environment which impacts on them (Townsend, 1983, p. 668; Zimmerman, 2005). Although the capability approach refreshingly complicates the concept of the "set of constraints" in an attempt to allow for a more accurate understanding of the different circumstances each individual is facing, it continues to frame the "individual" and the "circumstances" as stabilized and analytically separable entities. Sen argues that this strategy should not be seen as a *denial* of the complexity of socio-economic structures, but precisely as an *acknowledgement* of such complexity: "After acknowledging and taking on board the widespread relevance of the diversity of class, ownership, and occupation, we also have to go well beyond that to other diversities that influence the lives that we can lead and the freedoms we can enjoy" (Sen, 1992, p. 121). Precisely because of this complexity, he argues, we must focus on the end-result in terms of individual well-being. The problem with this claim might be, however, that some aspects of individual well-being become spurious if detached from their social context. For one thing, people acquire *political* capabilities only *after* they have identified with a particular socially recognized group. They realise their freedom at the price of social commitment.

Political agency and NGO-work with the *mountaineers* in Cameroon

The case study, from which we borrow illustrative material here, was part of a broader research project encompassing several case studies in different countries. The purpose was to explore how development interventions interact with local institutional processes. The research had been prepared during a joint seminar of all researchers involved. In designing the research procedure, we thus already combined some methodological literature on case studies (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 1997; Lavigne Delville and Mathieu, 2000; Thomas *et al.*, 1998) with "expert" experiential research knowledge. Although the research procedure was "common" to all cases, it was defined in a sufficiently "open" manner, so as to allow for site-specific opportunities and difficulties (De Herdt & Bastiaensen 2004). We subdivided the fieldwork into three phases. During the first phase, we mapped the institutional elements of the locality in terms of their salience as determinants of capability deprivations. The second phase consisted in a seminar, the main purpose of which was to prepare the

third and final phase, during which more focused research hypotheses were analyzed using specific research methods. We invested nine man-weeks in the fieldwork.

The NGO whose activities we studied is one of the big national-level Cameroonian NGOs, with headquarters in Yaounde. It operates in several provinces of Cameroon, the onion project being just one of the activities it was involved in. The project included activities in the area of production as well as commercialization. Consistent with current international standards, the onion project was given substance through the organization of a participatory seminar with all stakeholders. In a "pilot phase", the NGO opted to work in several villages in Extreme-North Province, each of which is situated in a different ecological zone. The village of Moskotà, where we conducted our fieldwork, was one of these pilot villages. We opted for an in-depth study of Moskotà because the NGO defined it as a "dynamic village" and because one of our team members (Abega) was already acquainted with the region.

> *Insert table 1 here* <

The available evidence on the *mountaineers*, and in fact on the Province as a whole, suggests persistent poverty. The 'Big North' as whole (comprising the Far North, North and Adamaoua Provinces) systematically performs very badly in comparison to other regions. Comparing the available data for 1990 and 2000, it also persistently lags behind in the *progress* made by Cameroon as a whole during the 1990s (table 1). Especially the contrast in the literacy level between the Northern provinces (around 40%) and Cameroon as a whole (around 80%) is telling. One also observes the pronounced difference in male and female literacy in the Northern provinces, whereas there is almost no difference between female literacy and the general average at the level of Cameroon as a whole. More detailed but older data on literacy indicate the extreme situation of Far North province. For 1995, Government of Cameroon (2002) reports an adult literacy rate of only 27% in the rural parts of Far North province –compared to the provincial average of around 40%. Furthermore, our own field experience tells us that even this rural average is not attained in the Mandara Mountains, and that especially women are *de facto* almost impossible to interview in French. In Moskotà, we failed to find a single female who was able to conduct a simple conversation in French (the language used at

school). These data are not only telling but also give rise to the question: what makes poverty so persistent here?

The data assembled during our fieldwork allow us to approach this question from two sides. First, we try to characterize the political capabilities of the *mountaineers* in historical perspective. Then, we analyze the political capability of NGOs sustaining the cause of the *mountaineers* – in particular through analysis of a specific development intervention on the part of a specific development NGO. Finally, we analyze the results of such an intervention as a reflection of a combination of both.

Political capabilities of the *Mountaineers*

Moskotà is inhabited by the *Mafa.* The *Mafa* have a long history of precarious living in what is widely known as the Mandara Mountains, in the Far North province of Cameroon (Boutrais, 1984). The name Mandara Mountains is in itself quite telling, as it refers to the *Mafa*'s eternal enemies, the Mandara people, a politically dominant minority in the region. The Mandara used to live in peaceful coexistence with the Islamic Fulbe people, who occupied the large plains and urban centres of the Province. In fact the whole region was once part of a larger sultanate stretching from Northern Nigeria to the North of Cameroon, where the Fulbe and their allies used to engage in, slave raiding, among other activities. So until fairly recently, the *Mafa* could only achieve peace and, earlier, escape from the slave traders at the price of isolating themselves further in their already highly populated mountains.[2]

Moskotà is one of the villages originating some 50 years ago in the previous no-man's land between the Mafa-occupied mountains and Mandara-dominated areas. The North of Cameroon only became economically interesting in the second half of the twentieth century, at the height of the colonial era, when it emerged that the plains were ideal for cotton production. There was a huge labour force to be found in the mountains on condition that the region could be sufficiently pacified. This happened during the 1950s, when people gradually descended from the "safe" mountains to settle at the foothills.[3] At the same time, Christian missionaries started arriving in the wake of the colonial structure. They soon laid the foundations for a process of emancipation of the "kirdi" (literally

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"pagan") as they were called by established (Muslim) society. The "classical" interventions in healthcare and education by the missionaries proved fertile, not in the least thanks to their Christian identity. As Mary Douglas would argue, with Christianity being a world religion on an equal footing with Islam, the religious field provided a potentially important analogous framework for questioning traditional relationships of inferiority/superiority between the *mountaineers* and the Mandara/Fulbe. For the mountain people, conversion to either Protestantism or (to a lesser degree) Catholicism was a means of acquiring an identity that put them on a par with adherents to the other world religion, while it also allowed them to claim a cultural difference from the former slave hunters (Boutrais, 1984; Schilder, 1994; Van Andel, 1996).

When Cameroon gained independence in 1960, a new phase set in, including for the "kirdi". A young Muslim president from the North, Ahmadou Ahidjo, came to power. As his (democratic) political weight depended on the importance of the group he represented, he was careful to characterize the entire Northern Province as Muslim. Consequently, millions of mountain people saw their opportunities restricted by a Muslim society that was able to profit from the national state's structures in order to further its hegemony in the North. The Ahidjo regime even restricted the movement of the "kirdi", banning them from travelling to the South. The reasons invoked by the Ahidjo regime for this course of action were more or less the same as those invoked by present-day European governments to prevent the free movement of "illegal aliens". The political answer was also very similar: access was restricted, and alleged "tramps" were arrested and sent back home. In this way, the centre of power was able to represent the Northern part, or about a third of the country, as being entirely Muslim. This, however, does not mean that the mountain people were totally bereft of their agency in broader Cameroonian society; it merely means that this agency depended on their public conversion to Islam. Table 1 quantifies the phenomenon: during the Ahidjo regime, almost 90% of all administrative positions in Northern Cameroon were occupied by people with Muslim names.

< insert table 2 here >

The situation changed dramatically with the end of the Ahidjo regime, in 1982, when the current Christian and Southern president Paul Biya came to power: from then onwards, most of the "kirdi" became the natural allies of the ruling party (Rassemblement pour la Démocratie du Peuple au

Cameroun, RDPC), *against* the former Muslim-dominated regime. One of the rather simple ways in which the regime opened up the political space was by dividing the Northern Province into three parts. This way, the Extreme-North Province, where the "kirdi" constituted a demographic majority, was given a "voice" of its own[4] within the national structure, thereby considerably weakening the importance of the Fulbe-dominated North and Amadaoua Provinces. The spectacular change that was prompted is, for that matter, noticeable in the names of the administrators of Northern Cameroon: "Christians" and "non-identifiable" now dominate the state apparatus in the north (table 1). The local "lamido" or customary chief of Moskotà symbolizes this wind of change in a most extraordinary manner: having been converted to Islam only by the end of the 1960s – undoubtedly in response to the political pressures of the time – he decided in the mid-1990s to close the local mosque and convert it into a stable for donkeys. Also, the elections of 1991 were preceded by a massive campaign to ensure that "kirdi" obtain an identity card –and thereby gain citizenship and the entitlement to vote. This was one of the major elements explaining the defeat of the Muslim-dominated UDPN in 1991.

However, matters have become slightly more complicated since. It would be unwise for the government to entirely disconnect from a well-structured collective agent older than the State itself, with a potential role at the national as well as the international level. At the international level, not only does Cameroon have to take into account the potential instability of Nigeria and Chad, two neighbouring countries where religion appears to be an important and increasingly political factor. Cameroon can also play on its "Muslim-ness" when negotiating development aid with Arab countries and organizations such as ADB and OPEC, where these countries are very influential. At the national level, the Christian South sought an alliance with the Muslim north in an attempt to counter political opposition from the western part of Cameroon (Africa Confidential, 2002). RDPC strategists took these considerations on board, specifically in relation to their strategy for the parliamentary and municipal elections of 2002.

Our presence in Moskotà just a few months after the 2002 elections allowed us to look at this strategy "from below". In fact, the elections had caused a significant problem within the village: its population or at least the village elite was clearly divided on the issue, and some people feared the

situation may get out of hand. The parliamentary elections signified an important political turnaround for Moskotà, since its school teacher and director had "suddenly" been voted out of parliament.

> My destitution came about as a result of the decision by the local RDPC Committee that the Mandara should be reintegrated into the political game. Up to then, they had been excluded because they were Muslims and a minority in the region compared to the Mafa. This minority represents the hereditary enemy against whom generations of elders have fought, and with whom some still feel they have a blood feud to settle. For a while, the Mafa had had the illusion of a historical turn of the tables, but now they [the Mandara] were to be reintegrated. They [the RDPC local committee] would grant them the position of mayor. The former mayor, a Mafa, would in turn become the deputy, a position which I had occupied prior to the elections. So the Mandara chief, dressed in traditional outfit, called on his people to vote for the RDPC. I myself switched allegiance to the opposition party, the Social Democratic Front (SDF), but this party's list was rejected [by the electoral commission], which I attribute to some conspicuous manoeuvres (School Director)

Others argue that the SDF list was eliminated not because of some "conspicuous manoeuvres" but because it was headed by a candidate still member of another party (the school director apparently had not yet officially resigned from his post as RDPC deputy). Anyhow, it is true that RDPC won the elections in Moskotà. In fact, the 2002 elections transformed Cameroon as a whole, and not just the district of Moskotà, back into a one-party state. However, we are primarily interested in the implications for the political capabilities of the *mountaineers*.

One can conclude from the above story that the political agency of the Mafa is achieved by playing at least three games of chess at the same time. First, there is *the national-level bargaining game itself*, determined by the logic of national and international politics, according to which the party's base should be broadened so as to include the most important potential "voice", especially the "voice" already enlisted in opposition parties. To an extent, this "voice" can simply be bought. Indeed, there is enough evidence to conclude that this is precisely what happened. However, it should in part be bought with political positions. To remain in power, to keep the voice of the Mafa alive in

parliament, one must also give some space to one's adversaries, *within* the same party. A second game of chess concerns the *internal organization* of the *mountaineers*. Given their democratic dominance, the Mafa will always be better represented than the Mandara within the political structures. However, precisely within such a context, the more important question is not inter-ethnic, but intra-ethnic in nature: who will be the better representative of the Mafa? An intra-elite competition –and bargaining problem – ensues and, as we have witnessed, not always to the benefit of a cooperative solution. The third game of chess is played against *power holders in other "systems of justice"*, as Joel Migdal (above) would call them. The ex-deputy already mentioned the role of the Mandara chief in promoting the RDPC. The presence of the "Prince", the son of a former Mafa chief on the SDF list, demonstrates a similar cross-cutting of power relationships. Also, there is a visible connection between the SDF list and the Protestant Church – or to be more precise the choir of the protestant church. At the local level, precisely this third game assumes special salience, as people are bound to meet each other in a variety of circumstances and in varying interpersonal relationships. So the multi-stranded character of local-level interaction explains how conflicts in one field can easily spill over into another, with an ensuing tendency to nurture rumours and accusations of different sorts (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2003, p. 41). It is this tension we were confronted with at the moment we visited the village.

Another conclusion from all this is that, the final impact of the 2002 elections on the political capabilities of the Mafa is not sure. Many of them lost the elections of 2002, but then, the Mafa represented in the RDPC won them, and indeed, many of them not allied to the Mafa's customary leaders. What is clear in any case is that, compared to the political situation in the nineties, the context has changed from one where ethnic, Christian and political cleavages significantly coincided, to one where these cleavages become blurred again. Pro-poor strategies will thus have to change from a confrontational to a more integrative mode. It is inherent in alliances with the "non-poor" that the agenda of the "poor" is not very visible anymore. But whether all of this adds up to good news for the Mafa remains to be seen.

An urban NGO sustaining a peasant movement

The NGOs general objective is to strive towards a broad "peasant movement" that is able to withstand pressure from other interest groups in agriculture, and to define a pro-peasant development policy for the country as a whole. The onion project fitted well into this general objective. The central idea behind the project studied was what Peter Evans would call an investment in collective capabilities. In order for small producers also to be able to benefit from the change in relative prices since the devaluation of the Franc CFA in 1993, it was deemed necessary that they should get organized. This way, they would be able to withstand the supposedly well-organized merchant interests in the onion sub-sector:

> The merchants, financially strong as they are, can buy almost all of the produce, often at a price below the production cost, and they sometimes sell it for ten times more. The persistence of such a system would result in the small peasants becoming poorer and the rich merchants becoming richer. So the representatives of the producers of the whole province have united for three days with the help of a Belgian consultant, in order to plan actions which will be executed over a period of five years, so as to correct this injustice (the NGO's Annual Report, cited in Abega and De Herdt, 2002 p. 44).

The NGO's main strategy, elaborated with potential beneficiaries and other major stakeholders during the participative planning process, specified five domains of intervention:

1- to obtain a better price and quality of inputs

2- higher productivity through more intensive cultivation techniques and better seeds

3- more land security for poor peasants

4- irrigation systems accessible to all

5- organization of collective sales

The immediate trigger for deploying activities in the onion sector was the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP), launched by the government during the 1980s and strengthened by the subsequent devaluation of the Franc CFA. On the surface of it, the era of Structural Adjustment was a window of opportunity for the region, or at least for onion producers. While, in 1989/90, Cameroon

still imported 3067 tons of onions from European countries, by 1995/6 this stream had virtually dried up (184 tons) (Mamtsaï, 1998). Conversely, in the same year, almost 5000 tons were exported, to neighbouring African countries, such as Gabon, Nigeria, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville and C.A.R. These shifts in export data clearly indicate shifts in income earning patterns to the advantage of onion-producing regions.[5] This success story has to do with more than a shift in relative prices only. More in particular, the private sector set out to explore the interest of non-traditional export products, including onions. AGROCOM was created as an association of private entrepreneurs, in (the port of) Douala. Soon, a link was established with onion producers in the Northern Province, through the *Coopérative Tignéré*, financed with French development aid. Some years later, the Extreme-North Province followed suit with the creation of FEPRODEX, a Federation of Onion Producers, financed with EU and Canadian money. It is at this point that "our" NGO comes into play: on the basis of the assumption that FEPRODEX represents mostly the interests of the rich, it plans to create more space within its structure for small onion producers, who are allegedly unable to sell their produce on their own.

However, the NGO's agency is also linked in more intricate ways to Structural Adjustment. In literate circles of Cameroon, SAP is mainly remembered as an era of increasing unemployment and of decreasing state involvement in the economy. In the case of Moskotà, the shrinking state was most noticeable in the educational system and in a major restructuring of the now partly privatized cotton industry. Many people were laid off and became ordinary farmers again. In practice, though, they did not switch jobs as often as imagined: their former job was also an investment in a particular network connecting them to the outside world. Because of this network, they now became "peasant" leaders, for example, who managed the "self-help groups" of cotton farmers.[6] Likewise, the president of FEPRODEX was himself *not* an onion producer but a former state employee working at the Ministry of Agriculture.

In one way or another, many of the local key resource persons on whom the NGO leaned in Moskotà had an "urban" history, but eventually returned to the countryside… where they posited themselves -and where posited[7]- as representatives of the "poor" villagers. The person who represented the locality of Moskotà during the participatory planning process of the onion project was

a laid-off employee from one of the big cotton companies in the village. He was also active in the Protestant church and in politics (formerly as an elected member of the village council for the ruling party, now active in the SDF, cf. supra). This profile did not necessarily make him the most "representative" of poor onion producers; it is rather the profile of one the most "urbanized" villagers of Moskotà. Furthermore, the President of the "Union of Onion Producers" spent seven years as a labourer in the public works sector in a neighbouring province before returning home again. Another dominant member of the "Union", a descendant of the local customary chief, was politically active in the SDF. He was moreover one of the only owners of a formal land title (18 hectares, compared to an average acreage of 2.5 ha per household in the same village). It was one of his onion fields to which the members of the General Assembly of the NGO paid a visit in the margins of their annual meeting at the provincial capital of Maroua. More intriguing still, he was one of the few people to participate in the onion trade with Douala, more than 1000 kilometres to the South. So, as it turns out, he was neither poor nor a peasant, and could in fact be argued to have been one of the "exploitative" traders the project was supposed to counteract.

Of course, there are reasons to expect this "urban connection". To begin with, nobody from the NGO itself speaks the local tongue. Consequently, contact is restricted to local French-speakers, mostly men. Further, all of these people had previous "urban" contacts and hence the cultural divide between them and the NGO staff was not excessively wide. All had spent time elsewhere, so that they were likely to have some knowledge of other languages besides their mother tongue, and to have been able to familiarize themselves to some extent with the "civilized world" outside their village. Eventually they returned, and, as a consequence of their previous experiences, they felt at ease precisely at the interface between "tradition" and "modernity", between "past" and "future", between "poverty" and "development", between a village and an urban setting. This is important, because NGOs are an urban phenomenon, and their employees are urbanites. While this might seem to be an uneasy position to find oneself in, appearances can deceive. Located at the front door of the village, as it were, this elite is able to capitalize on its "urban knowledge" and to "sell" the flow of benefits of this capital to their co-residents. One of the things to sell in this part of the world is *development* – or the

goods to which one can gain access through development projects. And it is precisely this access which cements their position of power.

The political complexity of poverty reduction in Moskotà

This "urban connection" between the external NGO and the local elite may, up to a point, seem reasonable enough. After all, language problems alone suffice to explain the elective affinity between the urbanized elite and a rural development NGO. Yet, other elements suggest that this connection considerably constrained the agency of the NGO in sustaining the cause of the *mountaineers*.

To begin with, as was already hinted at above, due to the concatenation of arenas at the local level, there is a risk of conflicts in other arenas spilling over into the project as well. In particular, it must be emphasized how politics was never far from development: the local "President" of the Union of Onion Producers was also an elected member of the municipal council, the Union's bookkeeper was the president of the local branch of the RDPC, and the local representative of our host NGO was *also* an ex-councillor of the RDPC. On the other hand, however, some other important members had aligned themselves with the ex-deputy, and found a political umbrella in the opposition party SDF. In this particular case, micro-level conflicts in the project arena clearly had a macro-level foundation.

Further, one of the side effects was that the NGO's rationale and approach were never challenged in the field. Convinced almost in principle, these local elites provided a very poor participatory check on the outsiders' initial ideas. For instance, the NGO simply failed to grasp that its option "to unite the poor peasants against the powerful merchants" (operationalized in objective #5) had, in a way, already been achieved: the NGO was in contact precisely with those peasants who were, at the same time, also operating as merchants. Admittedly, they were first and foremost peasants, not professional merchants: they traded in onions only part of the time, and were primarily working the fields. Also, none of the persons considered owned a lorry: when prices were deemed right, groups of peasants/merchants assembled in small teams to rent lorries collectively. In fact, most of the time, the lorry owners worked for the nearby cotton company; in slack periods, they rented out their service to other users, including onion producers. This was more or less the only way in which the onions of the region were traded. Consequently, when the NGO eventually decided to set up small groups of

peasants in order to organize a collective sale of onions in 2003, they evidently succeeded in this project without realizing they were simply reinventing an alternative that had already emerged spontaneously at least 10 years earlier.

However, the bigger issue lies deeper. The fact that the NGO was in touch with such a specific group of people adds a further complication, namely the issue of the *trickle down* from the NGO's intervention to *other* social groups. *If* any such trickle down effect were to occur, it would be due to the fact that it is in the urban elite's interest.

The organization's policy objective #4, that is, to distribute motorized water pumps via solidarity group credit, might be an instructive case in this respect. Objective #4 took the shape of a credit program, whereby motorized water pumps were distributed as credit, to be repaid over a period of three years, after each year's produce of onions had been sold. In the case of Moskotà, 27 pumps had been distributed in this way over three agricultural cycles. The program was set up as a group credit, where additional credit to a group was conditional upon the in-time recovery of repayments on earlier loans. On the face of it, this strategy was fairly successful. In the words of the representative of the government service that financed the loans, a recovery rate of 85% was deemed "satisfactory". Though this percentage would be insufficient to recover the whole capital, the representative argued for some leniency, given that the project was also partly an opportunity for peasants to learn about credit, loans, and paying back in time, and given that other types of borrowers were doing much worse.

However, while the state representative's data suggest a relatively clear and simple story, reality was disconcertingly complex. To begin with, even a four-week field visit did not allow us to obtain a clear picture of each credit group. When we compared the NGO's reports with those of the funding government service and with the records kept by the secretary of the Union of Onion Producers, it emerged that the numbers and names of groups varied. Furthermore, the number of group members was by no means fixed; it seemed to vary with the source of information and from year to year. Even members of the same group sometimes claimed to belong to different groups, while others claimed to have recently merged or to have created a new group. Moreover, there were at times different views on the names of the groups' presidents.

We also think that even a further analysis of these associations would not have led to a clearer institutional map. In our view, the problem is not so much that associational life as a "reality" is difficult to grasp. It is rather that *local* actors hold personal, sometimes widely diverging views on the same organizations, what they do, how they work and by whom they are led. Moreover, these views, and certainly the way in which they were expressed to outsiders, will undoubtedly also have changed in the light of the last election results: it is clear that some "solidarity groups" had split as a result of the latest events in the political arena. From this point of view, *any* attempt to map the institutional landscape in an unambiguous way could be seen as a political statement in favour of one and to the exclusion of several other views. Its flexibility and poly-cephalous character is part of its essence (Bierschenk and Olivier de Sardan, 2003).

However, if this was the case, then what mechanism lay behind the loan recovery? If credit groups are *not* stable and/or their memberships are as contested as is the case with any other civil society group, the group guarantee cannot possibly be the cause behind the "satisfying" rate of loan recovery. Thus, another mechanism must be at work that helps explain why most people nevertheless reimbursed as required. Moreover, whether or not the credit groups are virtual reality, the motorized pumps clearly were *not*. In this specific region, access to a motorized pump through a credit scheme was undoubtedly a very attractive prospect: the alternative was to smuggle in a lower-quality pump from Nigeria, to be purchased against cash payment. Accordingly, the question also arises who produced the NGO's discourse on "group credit" at the local level, or, in other words, who was able to manipulate the distribution of motorized pumps in the locality?

The first question is answered in the testimony from one of the persons who took part in a fieldtrip in 1999, just after it had emerged that nobody had repaid the loan instalment for the motorized pump due that year. This person represented neither the NGO, nor the funding government service; he merely served a logistic purpose:

> When it appeared that nobody had reimbursed, we, together with the NGO and the representative [of the funding government service], went to the region in order to requisition the pumps. We stored the ten pumps in a safe place in the parish until the owners were

prepared to pay. One after the other, the producers turned up with their money. Their onion crops had been drying out in the fields. So they had the money, but they just refused to pay (Abega and De Herdt, 2002 p. 52).

Thus, in a sense, the discourse on group credit *was* indeed just a reflection of a virtual reality. The *real* mechanism behind the repayments was an old-fashioned pawn system. True, it worked quite efficiently. At the same time, however, it probably also reproduced certain relationships of superiority/inferiority between the representatives of the intervention and the beneficiaries, in such a manner that it would be hard to deny this power element in other situations, e.g. at the moment of engaging in social learning processes.

But from another point of view, the discourse on group credit was *more* than merely virtual: it was also a public discourse legitimating the distribution of motorized pumps (Mosse, 2005). Interestingly, the concept of *groupe de caution solidaire* (or group credit with joint liability) was not translated into the local language. In other words, in no way could any of the non-French speaking beneficiaries have understood how the system worked. Thus, some members of the local elite may have acted as intermediaries, consciously colluding with members of the NGO to reproduce the solidarity-group discourse on the one hand so as to be able to distribute pumps to their in-group on the other. We found that one of the crucial actors in this respect was the representative of a local development association who lived in the region and who acted on the NGO's behalf in organizing the credit scheme. This actor was a rather archetypical member of the rural elite, in that he combined his NGO contacts with a local political mandate, a religious position, merchant activities and "ordinary" peasant activities. As the representatives of the NGO itself did not speak the local language and were not in the field on a regular basis, they were obliged to work through this person, e.g. in order to follow up the credit scheme. However, as it turned out, this person was also prepared to bend the rules in his own favour: not living in Moskotà, he nevertheless created a new credit group in his own village. All ten of its members also immediately received a motorized pump.

The NGO staff was unaware of this, but even if they had known, they might not have wanted to change procedure. After all, the loan system *seemed* to work: pumps had been distributed, credit

had been paid back, the planned objective had been achieved, and the donor organizations considered the system to be a success. In fact, all the stakeholders involved in the initial participatory seminar would have agreed on this success.

However, to the local elite, motorized water pumps were more than merely status symbols. They were also sources of rent, as most owners not only used them on their own fields but also rented them out. In this manner they were, for example, able to secure repayment of the credit due each year. Thus, the introduction of motorized pumps could be seen as enhancing the patronage networks structured around the local "urban" elite. No wonder, then, that this elite would agree that objective #4 was successfully reached. Further, an increase in the use of motorized irrigation did not resolve the problem of water scarcity or poverty. On the contrary, irrigation is documented to have had rather negative effects on the availability of water in the region. In this sense, the introduction of motorized pumps represents a private solution to the water issue: these pumps offer access to water for the private owner (and his clients) only. Conversely, people without direct access to motorized pumps face a choice between two unattractive alternatives. Either they refuse to use a motorized pump, in which case they must rely on a manual pump, even though these are becoming increasingly hard to operate effectively given that the ground water level is dropping. Or they become a dependent client of a rich motorized pump owner. Thus, the realization of objective #4 undoubtedly deepened poverty and inequality *within* the group of *mountaineers*.

We conclude that, despite respecting standard participatory principles, the interactions in the local arena around the development intervention are clearly constrained by prevailing power hierarchies and arguably even reinforce them. What we see at work here is a transcript written largely by modern international standards of how to proceed with development assistance and reducing poverty. The general objective to sustain a broad "peasant movement" against commercial interests engages a series of local, national and international actors into a coherent policy plan, which is precisely its essential function (Mosse, 2005). An understanding of the way in which this plan is *realized* in the field, however, requires careful scrutiny of the network of local arenas where *other* transcripts of the project are enacted.

The NGOs agency has to be understood in terms of its performance in all of these transcripts. Neither the NGO nor the representatives of the locality realized their agency through *voice*; they rather opted to explore the whole gamut of strategies in between voice and exit, in function of the strategic position they occupied in the network linking them to various political arenas that were partly or wholly invisible to others. As such, they negotiated a bridge between the donor-community and different kinds of Cameroonian agents. If the real world of NGOs (Hilhorst, 2003) is located precisely at the disjunction between different lifeworlds, it becomes tricky to identify the precise consequences of a particular action –let alone to predict them beforehand. As a result, it becomes problematic to define success or failure from the vantage point of one of the transcripts only, failures may be blessings in disguise and vice versa. Though in the short run, poverty and inequality may have deepened, it is also clear that the village elites at the local level have allied with the project as they read the discourse of the peasant movement as a discourse against the "commercial interests" of the Mandara. It is not sure whether, in the end, and in the long run, the NGO's activities represent an additional channel through which Mafa are capable to realize social mobility and blur the distinction between them and the mainstream of Cameroonian society –it is indeed this categorical distinction which seems to play an important determinant of the deprivations suffered by the *mountaineers*. If so, the failure to alleviate poverty in the short run would indeed turn out to be a blessing in disguise. Of course, nothing precludes in principle that such a blessing could not *also* be achieved together with a reduction of poverty in the short run.

Conclusions

Clearly, a research effort of nine man-weeks in the communities was not long enough to be able to fully grasp the situation at hand and thus we might still be understating the sometimes bewildering complexity of local reality. Yet, we feel we have succeeded in sufficiently documenting some of the pitfalls of pro-poor policies. Whitehead and Gray-Moline locate the latter in the intersection of the characteristics of the political regime, pro-poor policies and political capabilities. These elements refer respectively to socially dependent individual capabilities, collective capabilities and, what could be

called relational capabilities. The recent political trajectory of the Mafa people illustrates the role played by each of these elements.

To begin with, though in numerous respects the democratic character of the political regime in Cameroon can be questioned, it certainly made several moves in the right direction as concerns the *mountaineers*, who were, in a rather literal sense *discovered* as important political voters over the last decades. On the other hand, this deepening of democracy in terms of formal rights cannot be detached from a change in the concatenation of ethnic, religious, geographic and development networks; The immediate political capabilities of the mountaineers seem to depend much more on the evolving relationships they can cultivate with others than on their formal political rights.

As concerns pro-poor policies, we looked into the activities deployed by an NGO in the region. Here, we learned that *democratization of one public space does not automatically "add" to the democratic character of society.* Too much depends on the network of connections with other arenas in which the "democratic" space is embedded. Deliberative democracy may be a thin veil to legitimize existing power hierarchies by cloaking them in a discourse of equal opportunities (Cleaver, 2001; Mosse, 2001). More particularly, the evidence presented here points to the crucial importance of what happens at the interface where the external intervention meets the local actors. The case studied is an example of an intervention that collides with local elite networks with the effect that the project promoters did not even notice that the flow of funds destined to the poor ultimately reproduced the local structures of poverty. This was due both to the promoters' own conception of development and to their local counterparts' keen tactics to deflect resources and to incorporate them into their own strategies. In relation to the former, the organization's declared objectives, rules and incentive structure seemed to be equally influential as less visible aspects such as the promoter's social identity, his or her past experiences and network of acquaintances in the region. With regard to the latter, it is worth remembering as a representative of an external intervention that your hosts are much more connected to other local arenas than yourself. This obviously translates in differential agency freedom, given the relational nature of agency.

A focus on the interface connecting the external intervention to local political arenas, issues and actors quite appropriately gives centre stage to the "how"-question rather than the "what"-issue

(Pritchett and Woolcock 2004). If indeed the political struggle against poverty is to be waged at the local level, one of the implications is that we would argue for knowledgeable project managers operating at the field level and capable of permanently engaging in the kind of fine-tuned management of the local social interface. Another implication is that perhaps we cannot expect outsiders to develop serious political leverage within a time-span of a few years. "Permanent engagement" is to be understood quite literally, we fear. It might also be one of the more credible alternatives to acknowledging oneself as an important *local* political actor.

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[1] Part of this study is based on a research project on "poverty and social divisiveness", financed by the Vlaamse Interuniversitaire Raad. We also gratefully acknowledge the active participation of the local representatives of the NGO whose activities we have been studying. For reasons of discretion, its identity has been concealed. This text draws heavily on an endless stream of fruitful discussions we had within this framework, especially with Johan Bastiaensen and Ben D'Exelle. We also thank for helpful comments by Séverine Deneulin and by two anonymous reviewers.

[2] The Mafa are sometimes still referred to as "Matakam", which would derive from Fulfulde "Mettayamen", primitive, naked, and therefore inferior, people. The Fulbe also had a general term for all *mountaineers*: they called them "kirdi" (pagans), or "all those who are non-Muslims and who could therefore be subjected to enslavement" according to Qu'ranic law (Muller-Kosack, 1999).

[3] Even up to today, people try to keep control over some land in the mountains, almost literally to maintain a "fall-back" position in their cooperative conflicts with Cameroonian society.

[4] This tactic was neither new nor restricted to the provincial level. The French already applied it in 1920 in order to open up the political space to non-Fulbe. And in the Mandara Mountains themselves, the "old" *canton* of Koza was subdivided into four parts after independence, thereby undercutting the power of the customary chiefs (*lamidos*) who had collaborated with the colonizers.

[5] More specifically for the locality under scrutiny, the dynamism brought about by onions was visible also in the pattern of migration it set in motion. As already hinted at above, the fact that people from Moskotà were able to produce onions in the Mandara-dominated valley was eventually also an opportunity to move "downhill" and to integrate fully into Cameroonian society.

[6] Such self-help groups were promoted by the cotton company itself, as a way of subcontracting the production risks.

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Table 1. Evolution of some human development indicators, Cameroon, Big North and Far North province, 1990-2000

	Cameroon		Big North		Far North Province
	1990	2000	1990	2000	2000
% of people with income below 1$ a day	50.5	40.2	56.7	57.3	56.3
% literacy 15-24 years	78.7	82.3	42.2	39.3	41.3
% literate women 15-24 years	74.1	77.2	32	24.5	26.5

<u>Source:</u> based on PNUD Cameroon 2003, *Rapport de progrès des OMD au niveau provincial*, PNUD, Yaounde, pp. 1-8.

Table 2. Names of administrators in Northern Cameroon

	1960-82		1983-89	
	#	%	#	%
Muslim name	132	86	18	26
Christian name	13	8	43	62
Not identifiable	9	6	8	12
TOTAL	154	100	69	100

<u>Source:</u> Schilder 1994: 174