

Enhancing food security through resettlement?

The dynamics of crop choices in the Bénoué region, North Cameroon

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Enhancing food security through the development of the agricultural potential of the Bénoué region and at the same time redistributing the population of the Mandara Mountains – to reduce the assumed population pressure – were the two main policy objectives of the Nord-Est Bénoué Project (NEB)¹. With these ambitions, the NEB-project started in 1974 with the recruitment, transportation and settlement of farmers from the Far North province in the Bénoué river valley, southeast of Garoua in the North Province.

Officially some 80,000 people were transported and resettled. Another 40,000 were assisted in settling after they had migrated by themselves. Besides this regulated resettlement, numerous people have migrated into the Bénoué region without official interference since the end of the 1970s. Often, newcomers joined earlier migrated family members and stayed with them for some time before setting up their own household². Although the NEB-project stopped transporting migrants in 1986, people continued to migrate ; not

¹The MEAVSB (Mission d'études d'aménagement de la vallée supérieure de la Bénoué) executed the NEB-project, funded by the Cameroonian government and the European Union.

² This latter group was never counted and it is only through population figures that an estimation might be made of the total number of migrants as the population of the North Province rose from about 450,000 in 1976 to just over 800,000 in 1987 and an estimated 1,6 million in 1998.



Figure 1
Map of Northern Cameroon.
Arrows indicating the migratory movements.

only from the Far North to the North Province but also from the original project area to under-exploited areas further south (figure 1). Rather than resettlement, chain migrations and ongoing migration have thus become the prevailing features of the Bénoué region.

The inhabitants of the Bénoué river valley are generally poor peasant farmers. If they manage to generate a small surplus, this is sold to generate the cash needed for clothes, school fees, cattle, a bicycle, assistance to family in the Far North, etc. Although on average higher than in the Far North Province where most migrants originate from, erratic and insufficient rainfall is a recurrent feature of agricultural life in the Bénoué region. The most cultivated crops are maize, millets, sorghums, groundnuts, and cotton. The vast majority of farmers cultivates this export crop. This paper will show that the involvement in cotton production is not merely a way to satisfy cash needs after having secured food requirements. Focusing upon two villages in the region – Riao and Bamé (figure 1) – it is shown that involvement in cotton production can not be reduced to simple economic calculation by farmers. Rather, it is the specific socio-institutional arrangement of agricultural (input) markets – dominated by Sodecoton – which forces farmers to engage in cotton cultivation. Thus they gain access to fertilizer needed for the cultivation of hybrid maize, their preferred staple food, but also to numerous other important farming inputs. One may therefore question whether sustainable food production is possible without the cultivation of cotton – food security in the Bénoué region depends on cash crop production.

A major problem in farming is cash to buy fertilizer as well as its availability. The great majority of people is unable to mobilise enough capital at the beginning of the rainy season to buy fertilizer. Additionally, the supply of fertilizer is practically monopolised by the parastatal Sodecoton, which also delivers all inputs for cotton cultivation. The little fertilizer originating from neighbouring Nigeria is – like other products from that country – considered to be of inferior quality. The inputs for maize cultivation are provided by Sodecoton, and on credit, but conditionally. The few farmers who do have cash, may buy fertilizer from a cultivator who received it on credit from Sodecoton, but who is in immediate need of cash.

In order to understand how cotton production has come to dominate agricultural life in the Bénoué region, it is first necessary to elaborate briefly on the history of market-regulating institutions like Sodecoton. Thereafter, this paper will discuss the ways in which Sodecoton has arranged the supply of inputs on credit and marketing by organizing farmers in production groups (*cercles*) – a water-tight system to secure Sodecoton of repayment of these credits. Thus it will become clear how farmers' crop choices are limited, and always involve cotton, even if this endangers their food crop production and hence, food security.

I A brief organizational history of cotton production in Cameroon: Sodecoton and its predecessors

Although cotton cultivation in the north of Cameroon dates back to pre-colonial times, commercial production on any significant scale came about rather late. The German colonisers considered agriculture as a major source of economic gain from their colony and experimented with cotton, but they never actively stimulated its cultivation (Roupsard, 1984:614; see also Rudin, 1938:269-271).

Also the French colonial administration did not promote cotton since groundnuts were giving good enough results to enable the population to pay their taxes. In 1927 however, the *Société cotonnière du Nord-Cameroun et du Tchad* (SCNCT) was established but this private company was not very successful. The SCNCT operated in two domains. First, it owned plantations – which generally failed to produce significantly – and second, cotton was bought from local farmers. Later on the SCNCT handed out free seeds to increase local production. Although production increased, mainly in what is now the Far North Province (between 100 and 250 tonnes), most of the produce entered into the local trade because of the higher prices that were paid, leaving the SCNCT

with the unsold leftovers³. By the 1940s, when the SCNCT closed, commercial cotton cultivation was still a rather marginal activity (Roupsard, 1987:324-5).

In 1950 the *Compagnie française pour le développement des fibres textiles* (CFDT) was set up by the French colonial government. The CFDT turned out to be more successful than its private predecessor. Causes included higher producer prices, a premium paid just at the time of possible pre-harvest hunger, and the low price of groundnuts (Roupsard, 1987:329). After two decades the annual production was just over 90 thousand tonnes, principally produced on the plains of the Far North Province. The Bénoué region was, at that time, sparsely populated. It held only a quarter of the total surface under cotton and contributed one fifth to the total output of cotton (Roupsard, 1987:330, Lele *et al.*, 1989:9)⁴.

In 1974, the *Société de développement du coton* (Sodecoton) was established by the Cameroonian state and the French CFDT⁵. It differed from its predecessors in its explicit developmental goal. Its mission was – and still is – promoting cotton production, commercialising cotton and its by-products (oil, oil cake), *and* developing the cotton growing zones as well as modernising agriculture⁶.

In view of this developmental goal, it is understandable that when the NEB-project started, it sought to cooperate with Sodecoton. Thus, Sodecoton became responsible for agricultural extension in the project's resettlement areas, the so-called *encadrement*. Yet, as Sodecoton pushed farmers into cotton production, a conflict with NEB-project staff emerged in the 1980s since the NEB wanted

³ For more details, see also Roupsard, 1987:322-6.

⁴ According to Levrat (1984:38) only 10% of the total produce came from the Bénoué region. See also Pontié (1979) for a discussion of the impact of the replacement of groundnuts by cotton and the consequences thereof for food crops, the entitlement to land, division of labour, revenues within the family, and the development of exchanges (concerning Guiziga, Far North Province).

⁵ The French CFDT preserved 45% of the 'shares', the Cameroonian state and different 'sociétés' got 55%. In 1981 the participation of Cameroon increased to 70%, leaving the CFDT with 30% (Levrat, 1984:34).

⁶ See for example, <http://winne.com/Cameroon/toporg/sodecoto.html>

resettled farmers to concentrate on food crops, at least in the first years. As the only source of agricultural inputs provided on credit, Sodecoton has established a firm control over Cameroon's cotton growing areas, including the Bénoué region, holding also a monopoly on the marketing of cotton.

An example of this tightening control over farming is Sodecoton's campaign to intensify cotton cultivation. Fertilizers, treated seeds, pesticides and insecticides were introduced to the farmers. Officially, farmers had the choice whether to apply these intensive techniques or not. Non-adopting farmers were denied Sodecoton's extension workers' attention and, gradually, also seeds. Thus the new intensive cultivation techniques were imposed upon farmers or forced them to abandon the cultivation of cotton altogether (Levrat, 1987:40)⁷.

Despite Sodecoton's developmental mission, its operations came to resemble that of a commercial company with monopoly power, long before its actual privatization in 2000.

■ The organisation of cotton cultivation: farmers, cercles and AVP/GICs

To understand how Sodecoton dominates agricultural life in the Bénoué region, one needs to comprehend its functioning. Although Sodecoton has decentralized some of its operations since the late 1980s, for instance by creating farmer associations, its strict control over production and marketing is perpetuated by institutions such as the *agents de suivi, moniteurs, cercles* and *Associations villageoise précooperative (AVP)* or *Groupes d'initiative commune (GIC)*.

⁷ Another example of Sodecoton's control over farmers is the imposition of block-cultivation. Thus supervision of the production processes such as sprinkling of insecticides, control of crop rotation, calculation of the expected cotton harvest and the control on intercropping - which is prohibited by Sodecoton - is facilitated.

The workings of an *agent de suivi* and the problems he may encounter, are well illustrated by the story of Alfred, one of the two *agents de suivi* of the GIC Bame II. Alfred had given insecticides in beer bottles to people, but this was considered dangerous, since people also do other things with beer bottles and thus they could be poisoned. He was sanctioned with the withdrawal of about one third of his monthly salary. A second reprimand befell Alfred when a farmer begged him for fertilizer. Half of the fields of this man were far away and Alfred had not seen these fields. Hence he did not know whether they were actually ready for the fertilizer. Alfred gave the fertilizer anyway, but by incident the chef de zone came across the begging farmer and he knew that the far-away fields were not ready for the fertilizer. As Alfred should not have given the fertilizer he was punished, again by a deduction from his salary.

■ *Chefs du cercle*

Besides the *agent de suivi*, also the *chef du cercle* is supposed to supervise and monitor the cultivation practices of his group members. The group as a whole is responsible for the repayment of all credit taken by its individual members. The *chef du cercle* is paid the total amount due to the collective. If one member has produced insufficient to repay the credit he received, his debt to Sodecoton is subtracted from the groups' total; other members pay for the debtor. Thus Sodecoton externalizes the financial risk and the sanctioning of crop failure or deceitful behaviour of individual farmers. In rare occasions it happens that an indebted farmer flees from a group and village, but generally group members work it out amongst themselves. For example, the indebted farmer sells a cow or several bags of his food crop. In some instances another group member will pay for a debtor, for example a brother or a father. In rare occasions debts are repaid in labour⁹.

⁹ The ultimate escape for a heavily indebted farmer is to move away from the village again. In this rural society, with the majority of people being migrants, people come and go every year for all sorts of reasons.

If a group's balance is positive, the *chef du cercle* receives a premium – a percentage of the total production. It is commonly expected that he shares this premium – at least partly – with his group members by distributing some cash and/or organizing a small beer-party¹⁰. Generally people like to be in a group of which the *chef du cercle* is productive and successful, hoping he will be able to pay potential debts of fellow group members.

AVPs/GICs and the marketing of cotton

These organizations are led by a committee with a president, secretary, treasurer, and 'deputies' to all these positions. Committee members are paid by the AVP/GIC, yet the tasks of committee members depend much on the internal organisation of the AVP/GIC. It is often younger educated men who occupy positions in the AVP/GIC committees, pressed into it by the older men who do not read nor write.

The AVP/GIC is responsible for organizing the market for cotton. In November, when cotton is picked, its committee members designate an open space as market-place, make a little shed, and then wait for the delivery of an open container of Sodecoton – the orange-colours of which are typical for Northern Cameroon. Sodecoton tends not to deliver a container before producers have brought their cotton to the market-place. Hence, on behalf of Sodecoton, the *moniteur* and the *chef de zone* urge farmers to bring their cotton to the market, on the promise a container will arrive shortly (which is not necessarily the case). But as the harvest of cotton may coincide with the harvest of food crops, farmers may decide to harvest their food crops first. Other postponement in farmers' cotton delivery to the market may be the fear of theft or damage by animals or fire. People feel that it is safer to keep it at home.

¹⁰ If a chef does not do such things, eventually people will leave his group. An example is Digil, a *chef du cercle* who received 26.000 F CFA which he kept all for himself. The following year a lot of people had left his group.

is a lot of work and requires substantial capital to invest in seeds and the building of special storage. To conclude, not an easy option to escape poverty. An additional problem with the fore mentioned options is transport. For the transportation of their produce, farmers depend on unreliable and erratic bush taxies or traders from town. Villages like Riao and Bamé are accessible throughout the year, but numerous others cannot be reached by car during part of the year.

A third option to make money is wage labour. However the possibilities are very limited in these rural areas and, moreover, one needs time to work one's field. Even the *agents de suivi* work part-time, and also schoolteachers have to produce their own food. One needs quite a salary to be able to buy all the food for the family, and there are hardly any jobs that qualify for this.

Conclusion

Cotton cultivation is considered the only viable option to make money. And even though cotton prices keep dropping, theoretically it is still possible to earn a considerable sum of money with the cultivation of cotton¹². Despite high expectations of making a lot of money with cotton production, every year the majority of farmers is disappointed with the actual amount they receive from Sodecoton. Thus, the financial benefits of cotton production are not particularly substantial. Furthermore, all farmers complain about Sodecoton, its strict rules, the workload, about the performance of the *agent de suivi*, the *moniteur* and the *chef de zone*, about the prices charged for both inputs and agricultural implements like ploughs, and delays

¹² *The Herald Newspaper* (07/09/2002) reports that although the prices in the season 2000/2001 had dropped to their lowest levels since 1986, cotton production rose again (from 194,690 tons in the 1998/1999 to 230,485 tons in the year in review, 2001), as a result of the extension of the area cultivated and the improvement of output per hectare. This also proves that decision-making at farm level concerning cash crop production may be influenced by prices - in this case of the cash crop cotton - but it is not predetermined by prices as is often assumed in macro-economic studies. By looking at prices alone, the choices made by farmers can not be understood.

in delivery of inputs and the farmers' money after the sale of the cotton. There is, nevertheless, a compelling reason for farmers' engagement in cotton production, it is the only way to get fertilizer necessary to cultivate their favourite food – maize. The provision of inputs on credit by Sodecoton is for many poor farmers the only way to sustain their agriculture and thus safeguard their food security. These findings are at odds with one of the objectives of the NEB resettlement project which was to enhance food security in the north of Cameroon and – after some time – in the whole country.

As this paper has shown, it is not the profitability of cotton or alternatively the low prices for other crops, that pushes farmers into cotton cultivation. It is the institutional set-up of agricultural input and credit markets controlled by Sodecoton which leaves them little choice. If one wants to eat maize, one is obliged to cultivate cotton.

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