

WOMEN'S FARMING AND THE FOOD SUPPLY
OF YAOUNDE. HISTORY AND PROSPECTS

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The exact degree to which African urban areas depend for their provisioning on women's work in farming, processing and trading may be a matter of dispute, but there is no doubt about its significance. Women's farming, market networks and market organisations have all been described at length. What is altogether less clear is the direction of change within particular regional systems and its political dynamics. Sidney Mintz's general projection that small scale trading by women would gradually be replaced by larger scale enterprises run by men, for example, has been quoted by not well followed up empirically (1971). Do we know how regional food supply systems are changing in Africa ? and, above all, have we explored the crucial factors which explain the direction of change ? These questions are quite complex, involving attention to ethnic and class factors as well as gender, and to the intentional and unanticipated consequences of state policies on all of these.

The present paper is concerned with the position of the Beti farmers of the Yaoundé hinterland in the urban food supply system from 1960. The study grew out of a rural-based research project on farming ; it did not involve the systematic collection of data on marketing and therefore relies heavily on documentary sources and on interviews with officials for the marketing and policy issues.

To summarise briefly : there is an increasing need for food since Yaoundé is growing very rapidly. The local farming system is varied, productive, rarely subject to natural disasters, and suffering from land shortage only in particular localities. In principle, there is

great potential for experimentation in different kinds of expansion of food production for the market, from intensive truck farming to extensive fruit tree and plantain production. Government policy in the 1970s has been, I would argue, narrow and unimaginative with respect to the women farmers and traders who came to dominate a certain sector of the food market during the 1960s. On the other hand, it was unsuccessful enough to allow space for the continued growth of this sector. The challenge now is to see how this sector is developing within the context of the regional system as a whole, whether there are specific constraints which affect women, whether the women themselves are developing means of dealing with them, and therefore whether there are strategic policies to be pursued which give some positive incentive rather than being *laissez-faire* and intermittently negative.

One constraint needs singling out from the beginning, since it is primordial and affects all farmers and traders, and that is the nature of the infrastructure. The terrain is hilly, forested, and completely interlaced with streams : the two rainy seasons a year ensure continuous cropping but are devastating on the roads. The Yaoundé area has two major paved roads, and several laterite roads which are kept in passable condition. But a great many villages, even within a narrow radius from the city, are dependent on unpredictable and expensive transport for evacuating their crops. The major cash-earning crop, cocoa, is collected by the trucks of the state-run cooperative. Transport for food crops has been predominantly in the private sector.

With the transport constraints, the dominance of cocoa, and the rapid growth of Yaoundé in mind, it must surely be considered a striking achievement that there have been very few food shortages in the city, and that prices appear not to have gone into the kind of spiral characteristic, for example, of recent years in Nigeria. A full explanation of this certainly lies beyond the factors discussed in this paper, but I argue that the growing orientation of women's farming towards the market is certainly a factor.

Until the early 1960s, the Yaoundé food market was largely run by the state. A food requisition system, administered by the chiefs, was replaced in 1946 by a market system organised by the Provident Society (GUYER - 1980). This careful control over the food market only applied to Yaoundé : Douala was supplied, from an early date, by private traders, organised into an association, working the railway line from

Nkonpsamba. The political processes of Independence changed the whole structure : the Provident Societies were abolished, the civil service in Yaoundé was expanded, and new migrants poured into the city. This provided the stimulus for a great spur of activity in the food sector which remained almost totally outside of government control until the early 1970s.

Two major groups became the mainstay of the system. Traders from the West, possibly people who built capital and experience in the Douala system, became a major factor in the feeding of Yaoundé, and particularly in the bulk provisioning of the army and government institutions. Secondly, the women farmers of the Beti hinterland moved into the market. Motives are difficult to generalise, but the 1960s was a decade of gradually rising prices, of declining and stagnant cocoa incomes, and of increasing family investment in children's education. Budget studies suggest that women in the rural areas increasingly sold to the market and took over purchases of food supplements and minor household costs. This was achieved, however, by intensifying the current repertoire of cultivation practices, rather than by developing either new field types or a new gender division of labor.

All the evidence suggests that from the urban perspective, this combination worked very well. Food costs were low in relation to salaries in the early 1960s, especially by comparison with other urban areas of Africa (1). However, pressures were eventually felt, and urban, food prices doubled between 1965 and 1972 (R.U.C. - 1973 : 6). The causes of this inflation are not easy to reconstruct. The sources are at variance

(1) Yaoundé occupational structure was dominated by relatively high-earning civil service and other professional work, which therefore makes the simple comparison proportions of income spent on food a very unreliable index of its real cost. There is also no dependable way of calculating self-provisioning, and one therefore does not know what proportion of the total diet is accounted for by the expenditure figures of the budget surveys. However, even with these methodological problems in mind, the proportion of expenditure devoted to food and drink by urban dwellers in the 1960s in Yaoundé was low, at 32 % (SEDES - 1964/5 : 30). In urban Ghana in 1961/2, it was 57.2 % (a figure which includes tobacco since this was grouped with drink for survey purposes) (GOLDING - 1962 : 22). African working class populations were spending between 50 % and 70 % of their cash incomes on food during these post-war decades (GUYER - 1984 ms).

on the relative contributions of "manufactured items", which were directly affected by international inflation, and local foods (N'SANGOU - 1977 : 7 ; R.U.C. Note annuelle de Statistique 1974-5 : 70, and Appendix Table). Since the cost of transport rose more than any other item, and this well before the international shift in 1974, it is at least questionable that local conditions of supply from the farm were a major factor. Also, there is some suggestion that the West declined as a source of Yaoundé's food : as Nigeria's oil-spurred growth picked up momentum, certain areas of the rural West began to sell across the border. There was also growing competition from Libreville, where food prices were considerably higher than in Yaoundé (LEBIGRE - 1980). FRANQUEVILLE was struck by the relative restriction of the Beti hinterland between his first study in 1968 and his second in 1973 (1976).

In this situation, local female farmers and traders were able to demand prices which kept up with the inflation in imported goods such as agricultural tools, kitchen equipment and cloth. There is no good evidence that farming had run up against some kind of technical ceiling, nor that the women were operating in anything but a competitive, "rational", framework. The trouble, I believe, was that officials, accustomed to "cheap food" through women's supportive activities in home production, and state control in regional management, tried to impose a kind of "citizen's obligation" model on the situation. Studies in 1964/5 had shown that urban retail prices were up to double the producer price, which seemed to allow exorbitant margins to the transporters and intermediaries (SEDES - 1965 : 19, 20). But the real costs of running a food system through competitive pricing had simply not been studied or understood : the cost of transport, gasoline, credit, risk coverage with perishable goods on bad roads, market fees, and so on. Local officials in smaller towns still spoke in terms of the obligation of their own local peasants to sell to them, regardless of prices elsewhere. Villagers on a road linking Yaoundé to a smaller town reported that in the mid - to late 1960s they were instructed by the police as to which of the two markets they were supposed to sell to (Personal communications 1979).

Consequently, the blame for the price rises was laid squarely on the "excessive" margins of the "bayam-sellam", often unambiguously designated as feminine by the term "revendeuse". The imagery associated with the public debate evokes and condemns independence and/or disloyal-

ty on the part of the traders : "a form of commerce which is complex, non-integrated, traditional and primitive" (N'SANGOU - 1977 : 7) ; "the most anarchic sector because of its lack of organisation" (Governor of the Centre-South, in DIARRA - 1974 : Annexe 6). At a later date a commentator remarked on "the disloyal competition" of the traders against a government enterprise (Cameroun Tribune 24.9.77 : 4).

The fact that this was largely a female sector is not irrelevant to the conceptualisation of the issue in terms of loyalty, nor the authoritarian measures initially taken. In September 1972, market control was implemented through strict enforcement of the *mercuriale*. This was part of a broader attempt to bring the informal sector under control, and included ordinances against vagabondage and prostitution (FRANQUEVILLE - 1979 : 353).

Both prongs of the offensive were failures. In the market, the traders observed a boycott which was acknowledged to risk "disorder or a crisis in the urban food supply" (Governor of the Center-South, DIARRA - 1974 : Annexe 6). In the rest of the "informal sector" there was only a temporary lull (FRANQUEVILLE - 1979 : 353). Faced with opposition and with the enormous economic and social cost of continuing to police the situation, local government backed down, acknowledged the importance of traders and recognised that their interests and those of the peasants coincided.

The alternative policy, pursued throughout the 1970s, was a) to stimulate the production of food by socialised producers through extension of credit (FONADER), b) to encourage a departure from "the excessive mixed farming evident in traditional agriculture" (R.U.C. Comice Agricole - 1974 : 40), and c) to provide an alternative marketing structure to the "shady intermediaries" of the Governors' report on the crisis (DIARRA - 1974 : Annexe 6). In fact, if not in explicit intention, these measures totally bypassed the women's farming and trading which was actually feeding Yaoundé, in favor of other sectors of the populations. Women farmers were never organised into the kind of groups which could, in theory, get FONADER loans : the main crop to be promoted was plantain grown by men ; and the new commercial institutions were aimed

at undercutting the traders' prices in the Yaoundé retail market (1). Parts of this "Green Belt" policy can certainly be justified : diversification in the rural sector could be to everyone's benefit. But these particular interventions contained no means at all for placing resources and improved conditions within the currently functioning system, that is, within the female economy.

What possibilities have there been for doing this ? There are many, particularly in the transport/infrastructure domain, but I want to mention one potential input into production and processing. One of the main staples whose production and marketing could clearly be increased is cassava. In the 1960s cassava and plantain were of approximately equal importance in the rural diet, but cassava was twice as important in the urban diet (2). Unlike plantain, which is worked by both men and women, cassava is an exclusively female crop. Its success as an urban staple, however, does not mean that its cultivation and marketing are without problems. One is a parasite, known locally as Kamsi, which cuts productivity to a very low level wherever the soil is infested. In the late 1970s there was little or no technical research being done on this. Another is the processing problem. The amounts of labor and family capital needed to process cassava on any scale are high, and probably beyond the current capacity of most women, even where they can produce

(1) FONADER investment patterns, by crop, 1976-78, were as follows :

Crop	Percentage of total credit	
	1976/77	1977/78
Cocoa, coffee, other "cultures riches"	80	61
Plantain	8	35
Other food crops	12	4
Total	100	100
Total Amount (CFA)	103 million	132 million

Sources : R.U.C. - 1978 : 34

It is quite clear how plantain came to dominate investment funds for food crops in the Yaoundé area.

- (2) In the rural area, plantain and cassava contribute about equally to the diet, although this varies from one area to another. Each crop contributes 5 times as much, by weight, to the diet as the next most important staple (SEDES - 1964/5 b : 47). In Yaoundé the three major staples were cassava, plantain and cocoyam, contributing respectively, by weight 38 %, 20 % and 14 % of total consumption of locally grown vegetables (SEDES - 1964/5 : 32). Cassava was half the price of plantain, per kilo (SEDES).

enough of the crop itself. It requires soaking pots, praters, drying platforms and, for some processes, firewood. It requires portorage, labor time in grating and soaking, and vigilance over the drying process in a rainy climate. On the other hand, it is highly desirable that storability be improved in the system as a whole, especially with an infrastructure problem which will be fairly intractable in the short run. Even though various cassava processing techniques have been developed elsewhere in Africa and the New World, literally nothing was done during the 1970s to explore the technical possibilities of promoting cassava production and processing, to calculate its costs and benefits, and to project its potential for cutting into rural labor bottlenecks, or to estimate its acceptability by the rural women themselves. The demand for a solution may not be forcefully articulated in words, but one has only to see every remaining square inch of the abandoned Obala road surface, over a distance of forty kilometres, covered in drying cassava, to hear the message.

In the event, almost all the "Green Belt" policies have been failures. FONADER ended up loaning mainly to civil servants rather than full-time farmers, or to groups of young men who failed to repay the credit. The parastatal organisation known as MIDEVIV (Mission pour le Développement de la Culture Vivrière) has progressively abandoned many of its projects : it has found its own plantain plantations to be very expensive and inefficient, and has only retained the seed multiplication functions. It has had to give up most of its commercialisation functions in the face of the increasing outright subsidies needed to keep retail prices down. MIDEVIV had planned to buy cheaply and in bulk in the rural areas and therefore sell cheaply on the market. The traders, however, were ready to pay higher producer prices and therefore captured the market, literally in some cases, since traders visited villages the night before the MIDEVIV truck and bought up all the produce. As a result, MIDEVIV was forced to buy further and further from Yaoundé, resulting in prohibitively high transport costs. Even when the produce was sold at the MIDEVIV outlets, the traders managed to turn the system to their own advantage by presenting themselves as consumers, buying at 70 % of the market price and then reselling in the open urban market. Hence the newspaper article with its rhetorical question : "what can one do to distinguish a housewife from a trader ?" (Cameroun Tribune 24.9.77 : 4).

The conclusions are clear, namely that the system already in place continued to function, and at prices, levels of predictability and efficiency exceeding those of many other African urban systems. Indeed, it began substantial elaborations and developments. The most important of these seems to be night markets, in both the regional bulking centers and the urban retail market. Night markets are particularly suited to the work rhythms of female farmers who produce the goods, and salary-employed civil servants who purchase them (personal communication : Paul Nkwi).

There is therefore, powerful evidence that the local, small-scale, "private sector", consisting largely although by no means exclusively, of women, can meet some of the challenges of expanding demand. It can only do this to maximal advantage, however, with some strategic investments, not in direct control mechanisms, but in the development of techniques and resources which feed into the strengths already there. It is not at all a question of "public" versus "private" enterprise, as the IBRS Report of 1981 tends to imply. Indeed phrasing the issue in this way allows what are internally differentiated policies and sectors to be treated as homogeneous and opposed, when it is really a question of which "public" policies are consonant with which "private" enterprise. The former approach leaves the door open to grouping large-scale "private" importers of Thai rice into the same category as the "private" women traders who bulk yams in the Obala night market, and to equate the kind of control attempted by MIDEVIV with all other possible public measures to promote local food production. The latter identifies local potentials and supports them.

The Yaoundé economy has proved resilient and policy has been eclectic enough to allow local processes to develop. It is not, however, without constraints and bottlenecks, some of which reflect the particular nature of a system which is largely dependent on female labor. It is by no means inevitable that this system will reach some kind of ultimate bottleneck in the near future and go into "natural" decline, nor that any other might replace it would actually supply food to the urban populations under better conditions. It is, therefore, to be looked at as a valuable resource, to be studied for its strengths and its potentials, and not to be relegated to "tradition" and assumed to be a problem. Opinion is moving in this direction : Jeanne Henn has argued for more attention to women's farming in Africa in general (1983), and lo-

cally N'Sangou has suggested that one should not "kick away the canoe which has brought you across the river" (1977 : 43). The case of Yaoundé shows, I believe, that this is not just a call to "pay more attention to women", but to understand those aspects of African food supply system which have actually worked. Building on them has to be part of any agenda to the future.

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ABSTRACT

This paper is concerned with the position of the Beti farmers, in the Yaoundé hinterland, in the urban food supply system since 1960. The challenge now is to see how the sector is developing within the overall context of the regional system, whether there are specific constraints affecting women and whether the women themselves are developing ways and means to deal with them, and therefore whether there are strategic policies which would give positive incentives to women farmers and traders.

RÉSUMÉ

Cette communication examine le rôle des paysannes Beti, dans l'arrière-pays de Yaoundé, dans le système urbain d'approvisionnement alimentaire depuis 1960. Il s'agit maintenant de voir comment se développe ce secteur dans le cadre général du système régional, s'il existe des contraintes particulières affectant les femmes, et si les femmes elles-mêmes élaborent les moyens d'y faire face, et par conséquent s'il existe des politiques stratégiques susceptibles de fournir aux femmes de véritables incitations à leurs activités de production et de commerce.