

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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Women's Tree Nurseries in Northern Cameroon

Yaounde, Cameroon
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Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Executive Director
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755 USA

Dear Peter,

Recently I flew from Yaounde, the capital of Cameroon, to Maroua, in the Extreme North Province of Cameroon. Located in a humid zone in central Cameroon, Yaounde has much green vegetation. Maroua, in contrast, is in a semi-arid savanna region, receiving less than 1000 millimeters (40 inches) of rain per year. Maroua is just south of Lake Chad and a large wildlife reserve, the Waza National Park.

From Maroua I traveled to Mokolo. The drive only took about an hour -- the road from Maroua to Mokolo is one of the best paved roads I've ever seen in Africa. We passed through countryside dotted with compounds consisting of round mud huts with thatched roofs, or occasionally small rectangular concrete buildings with corrugated metal roofs. Along the road I saw a man riding his horse, with his bright red and yellow cloak flapping in the wind.

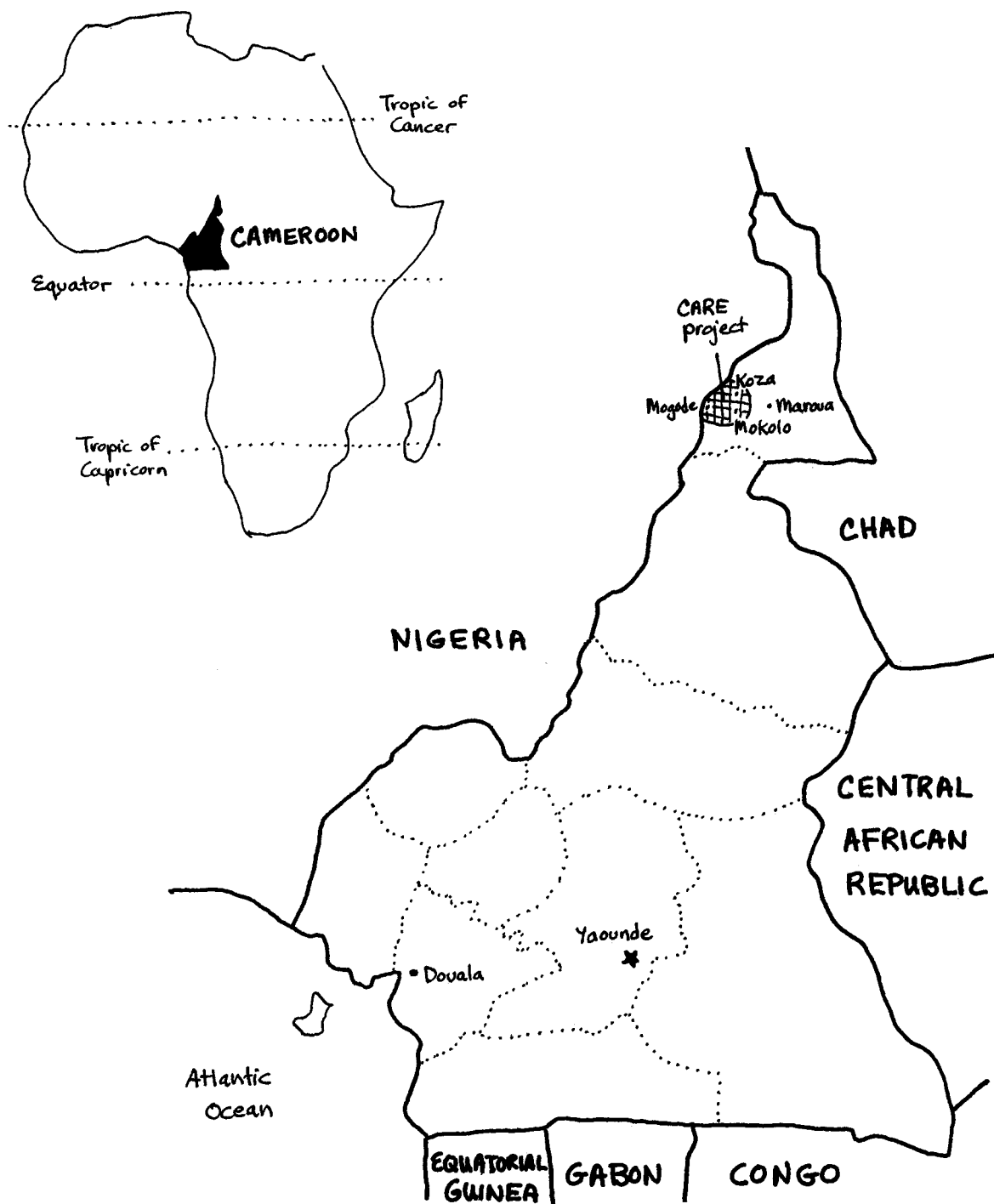
Mokolo was a real surprise -- with covered sewers, paved sidewalks, 24-hour electricity, and street lights. In Mokolo one can even direct-dial telephone the United States and France (although it is considerably more difficult to telephone Maroua, or anywhere else in Cameroon, from Mokolo). All these services are very unusual for a large African town in the bush. This town was particularly favored because the mother of the former President of Cameroon, Ahmadou Ahidjo, lived here.

I had come to Mokolo to visit a forestry project. CARE International has been working on forestry activities in northern Cameroon for the past six years. The project began as a community forestry project, but has evolved into a village agroforestry project. The focus, thus, has shifted from working with villagers as a group towards working with individual farmers. The forestry project extension agents work with villagers on establishing tree nurseries and planting trees on their individual farms. In each village, a village monitor manages the nursery. All village monitors are men, who are paid to water and care for the trees. Tree seedlings are given away free to interested farmers.

Approximately 10,000 people live in the project region. CARE has other projects in the area, which focus on health and nutrition, wells, and in the Gawar valley, integrated resources management.

Paula J. Williams is a Forest and Society Fellow of the Institute of Current World Affairs, studying human uses of forest resources in sub-Saharan Africa.

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Maps showing the location of Cameroon in Africa and the location of the CARE forestry project activities in northern Cameroon

(Maps adapted from: Newton, Alex. 1988. West Africa. South Yarra, Victoria, Australia: Lonely Planet Publications, p. 7, and Rolls, Jerry John. 1985. CARE/Cameroon Agroforestry Project Proposal, Appendix 1.)

Two years ago CARE set up a pilot women's project as a sub-component of the forestry project. During the first year, this pilot project received funding from the Women in Development office of the U. S. Agency for International Development. This pilot activity established women's cooperatives to produce and sell fruit tree seedlings.

One extension agent with the Village Agroforestry Project had been a woman. She had discovered local women's interest in forestry activities. As elsewhere in Africa, women in northern Cameroon are responsible for obtaining firewood and other forest resources. Women had not participated to any great extent, however, in the village forestry project, nor had they had access to trees. The pilot women's project aims to redress this past neglect.

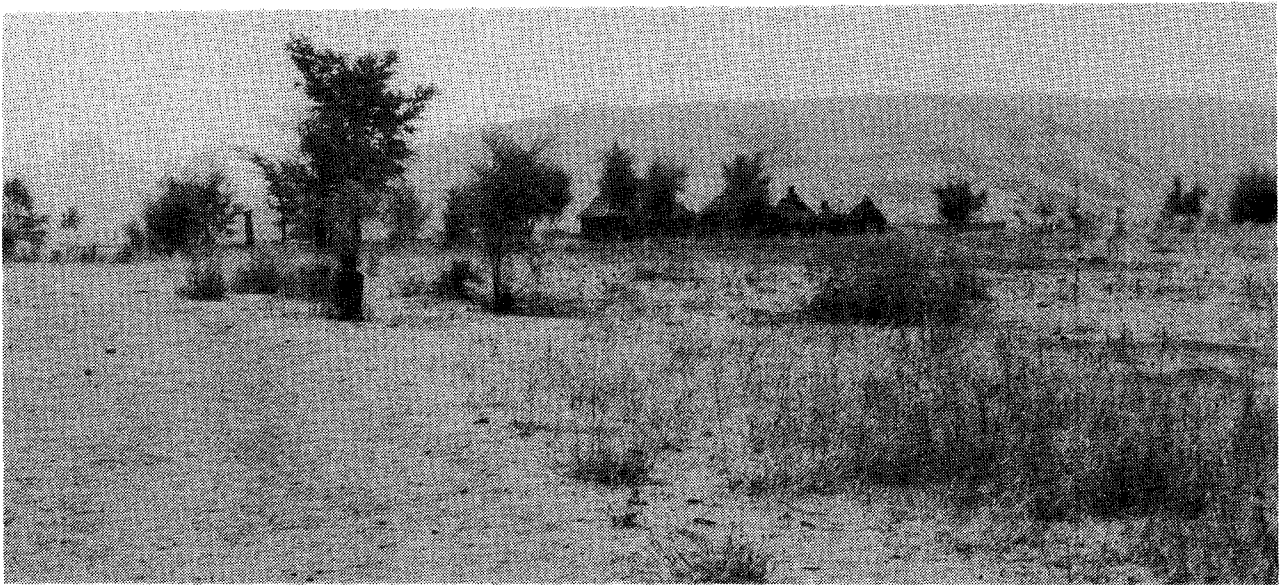
The women's project staff consists of six extension agents and a coordinator. One woman extension agent, previously with the forestry project, was transferred to the women's project. CARE hired five other women extension agents. The six extension agents are local women, who have some schooling, speak French, and at least one other local language. All women extension agents are single, and therefore do not have the same kind of family responsibilities as would married women. The coordinator is a female Peace Corps volunteer. The extension coordinator for the forestry project, Hama Hamadou Bello, has also worked with the women's project. He was acting project coordinator for three months, between the departure of the first Peace Corps volunteer and the arrival of the second.

CARE designed the women's pilot project specifically to generate income for women. Unlike the village nurseries, which rely upon paid labor, the women contribute their labor to care for the tree seedlings. The women share any revenues earned, plus divide any unsold tree seedlings among themselves. The possibility of earning income motivates the women to work hard. Project staff members believe that the women's nurseries have produced higher quality tree seedlings than have the village nurseries managed by paid male monitors.

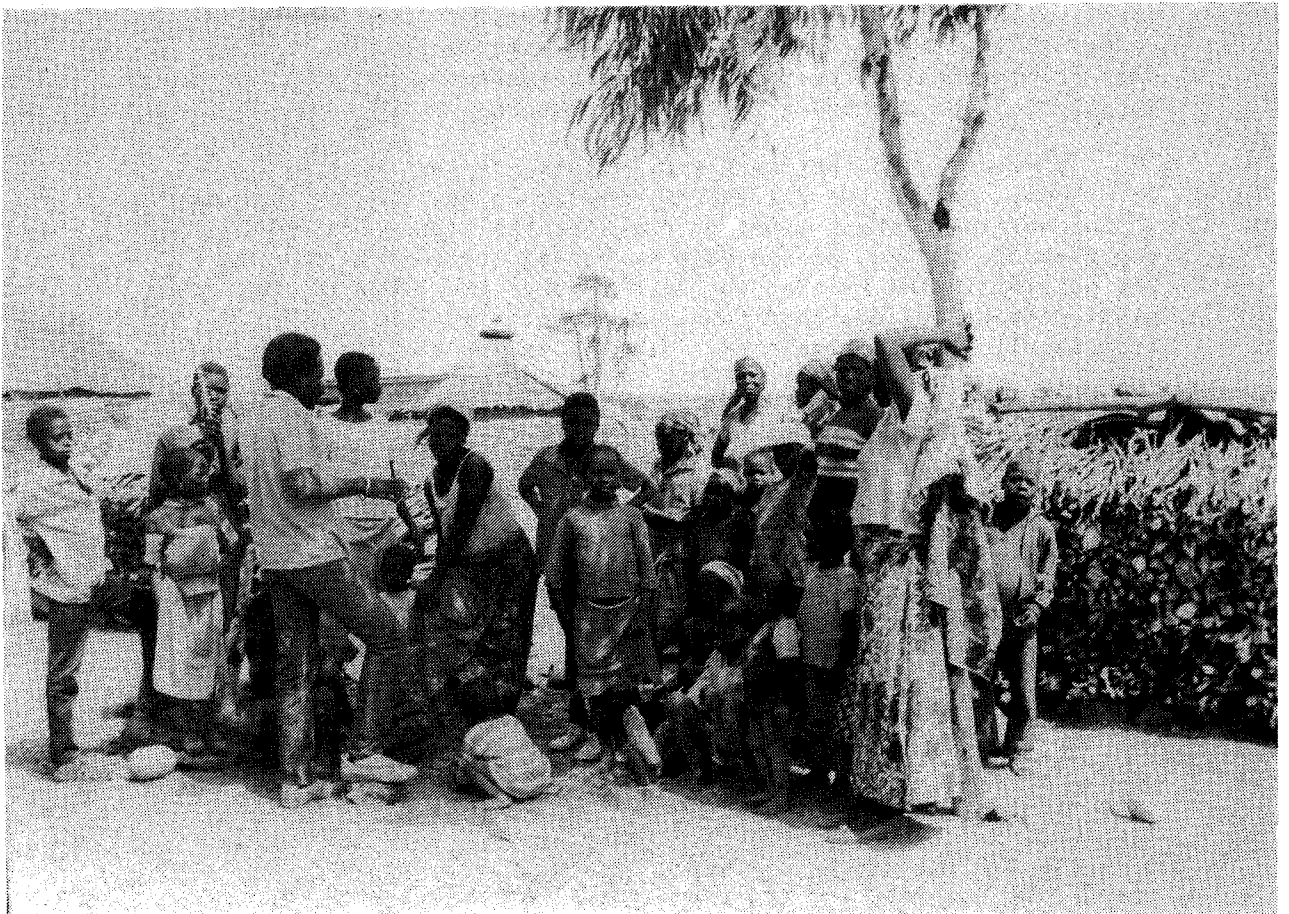
The cooperative movement is quite strong in other regions of Cameroon, particularly in western Cameroon, formerly a British colony. In the far north, however, there is little experience with cooperatives. In the region around Mokolo, such women's groups did not previously exist.

The women's cooperatives have gotten off to a promising start. The groups were set up where land was available near water, and where women expressed interest in forming cooperatives. In the first year, the project established 16 women's cooperatives in the Mokolo and Mogode sectors. Groups averaged from ten to fifteen members, while a few groups had over 30 members. In the first year, over two hundred women raised almost 10,000 tree seedlings.

The project supplied the groups with fencing, tools, watering cans, and tree seeds. Each women's group agreed on how to divide the work. Usually large work parties were held for tasks such as setting up the nurseries, mixing and filling the pots with soil, and seeding. Then the women organized themselves for watering the seedlings. For example, two women might water one morning, another two that evening, and so on -- with a rotation of duties to evenly share the work. Some groups chose a president, while others decided to work by consensus without a formal leader.



In Mogode sector, firewood is very scarce. Women and children may spend an entire morning (4-6 hours) traveling to collect wood and carry it home.



During the dry season women stockpile wood for their own use, not for sale. In the rainy season they are busy cultivating millet and peanuts, and do not have time to gather wood. (This picture shows the same region of Mogode as the previous picture.)

Groups varied in their fruit tree seedling sales. A major difference in tree sales occurred between the two sectors, Mokolo and Mogode. In the Mokolo sector, most people are Mafa. Among this ethnic group, women commonly sell agricultural produce. Among the Kapsiki in the Mogode sector, however, men generally market grains, vegetables, and fruits. Kapsiki men pay high dowries for their wives, and then control all the family finances. The men control all the income earned by family members, but then are responsible for covering all family expenses, such as clothing, food, and school fees.

Thus, while the eight cooperatives in Mokolo sold an average of 23 percent of their fruit trees, those in the Mogode sector only sold an average of 9 percent. In Mogode women gave their fruit trees to their husbands or other family members, to plant on their land. In the future, when their fruit orchards mature, their families will earn money from fruit sales.

In the second year, 17 groups are operating. A few of the less successful groups from last year did not continue. Four new groups have started in the Koza region, north of Mokolo. This year, besides growing trees, the women are also growing vegetables. The women expressed interest in growing common vegetables, such as lettuce, tomatoes, and cabbage. Project staff members also recommended less common vegetables, such as beets, celery, parsley, and leeks. The latter vegetables are rare on the local markets and thus may command better prices.

During the four days I spent visiting the project, I saw eight of the seventeen tree nurseries and garden plots. The first day we visited the Ouro Tada nursery and garden, located adjacent to a reservoir on the outskirts of Mokolo. When we drove up to the site, many people were at the reservoir. Some women and girls were fetching water or washing clothes. A group of boys was playing and swimming nearby.

The women's plot was fenced, with metal posts and rows of barbed wire. Barbed wire and thorny branches closed the entrance to the plot. The fencing protects the plants from goats and cattle. (Many herders with livestock move through the region, going from Chad to markets in Nigeria.)

The women had already planted guava, papaya, grapefruit, orange, lemon, and mandarin seeds. Some citrus seeds had spoiled, even though they had been refrigerated before planting. Others were being eaten by termites. The women had also prepared and filled the pots for the mangoes, which they plan to sow in late March. The tree seedlings must be large enough to plant during the rains (June to September).

The group's vegetables were already well along. Lettuce plants had been replanted from the seedling bed, and already had heads 3-4 inches in diameter. Hama commented that the lettuce would be ready to harvest during Ramadan and would bring a good price. (Ramadan is the Muslim month when people fast all day, but feast after sundown.) The women were also growing other vegetables, such as cabbages and tomatoes. Along one side of the garden was a pumpkin plant, just starting to spread its tendrils.

While we were visiting the site, two extension agents arrived, and then five cooperative members. The women had come to water their plants, and also to do some weeding and hoeing. Last year the group had earned about 20,000 francs CFA (US\$ 60), which had been split among the nine group members. After

the group sales, group members had divided the remaining trees. Each member chose whether to plant, give away, or sell her trees. Some women earned an additional 3,000-4,000 francs CFA (US\$10-13) from individual sales.

The local women raise money from other activities, such as raising poultry, collecting and selling firewood, making and selling "beignets" (fritters or donuts) or millet beer. How do fruit tree revenues compare with women's income from other activities? The women explained that although a woman might earn 10,000 francs CFA (US\$30) from other activities, group activities are very important. Other income comes in small amounts. Women spend these other earnings in "dribs and drabs," on small things. The money never accumulates. In contrast, tree sale income comes in a chunk, which could be used for making significant purchases, such as children's clothing and school notebooks. (The tree sales occur before the school year starts in September.) The women are proud of what they have achieved as a group, and enjoy working together.

The women in Ouro Tada are better situated than the other women's groups. Being so close to the large Mokolo market, last year they sold two-thirds of their tree seedlings. They earned more than any other group. This year the group was very inspired. They started growing their vegetables before the other groups did -- and even bought their own vegetable seeds.

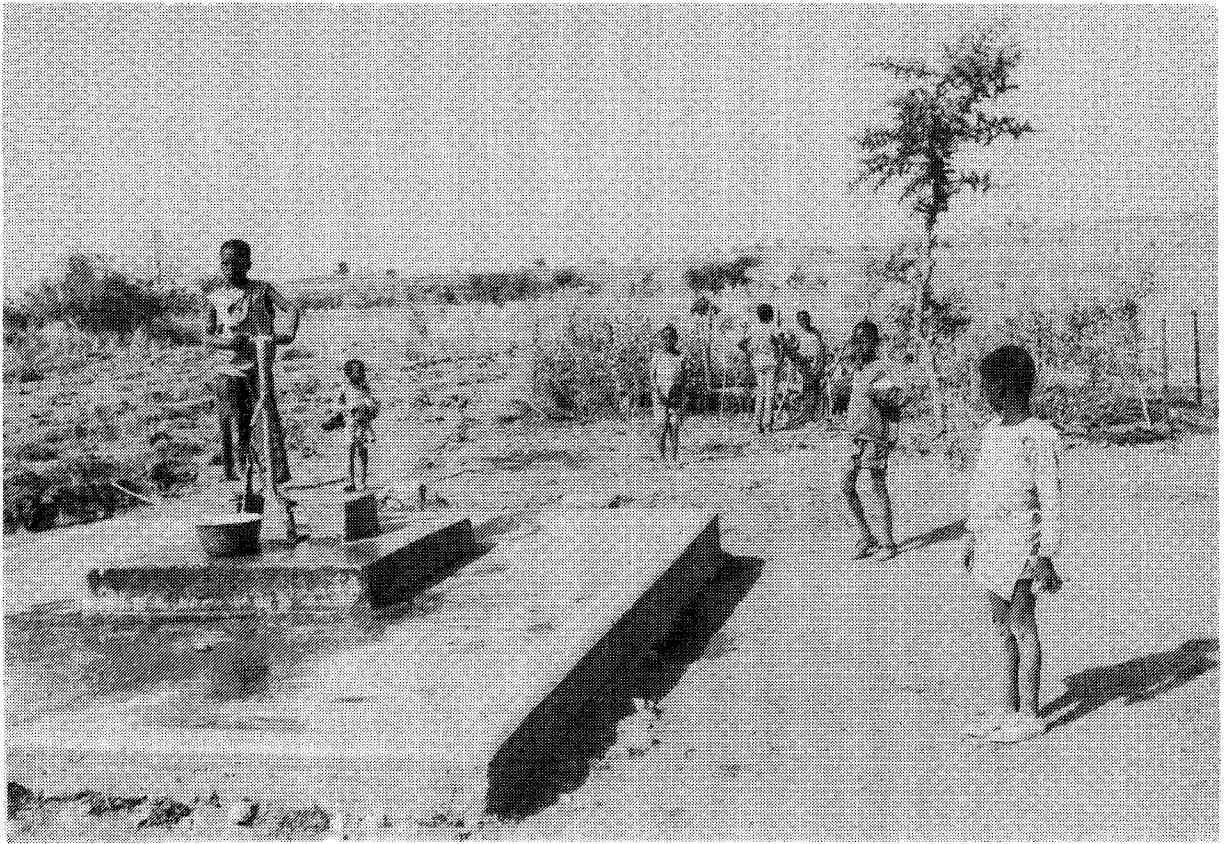
The women sell their tree seedlings in various ways -- in nearby markets, at the tree nursery, or to friends and neighbors. The price per seedling varies, depending upon the competition. A woman may carry several tree seedlings four kilometers (2.4 miles) or more to a market. If she discovers that other merchants are also selling fruit tree seedlings, she may drop her price rather than carry the seedlings back to the nursery unsold.

We asked the women what might happen when they begin to produce grafted mango tree seedlings? [Project staff members were to receive training in grafting in mid-March. Then the extension agents will train the women's group members in grafting techniques.] Did the women think that they would be able to sell the grafted seedlings for a good price?

The women expressed concern -- they fear that people will steal the grafted seedlings. A discussion then ensued about how this problem could be minimized. The trees will be grown for eighteen months before sale. The women decided that maybe they will guard the trees themselves, at their homes, rather than trying to guard them at the group nursery.

Other groups have different problems. At a nursery in the Mogode sector, we talked with two women group members and a local man. The man mentioned that the group did not work well, because of problems of jealousy. Over lunch in a nearby village, we talked with Hawa Hamadow, the extension agent. She explained that problems had arisen when group members had fallen sick and had not been able to work. Sometimes they had not bothered to inform the others or ask someone to work in their place. Thus, other members had just assumed that the sick women were lazy and did not want to work.

A major constraint is the availability of land near water sources. Many different organizations and development projects have been installing borehole wells and pumps throughout northern Cameroon. In some areas, dams have been built, to create small reservoirs. Nonetheless, given the high

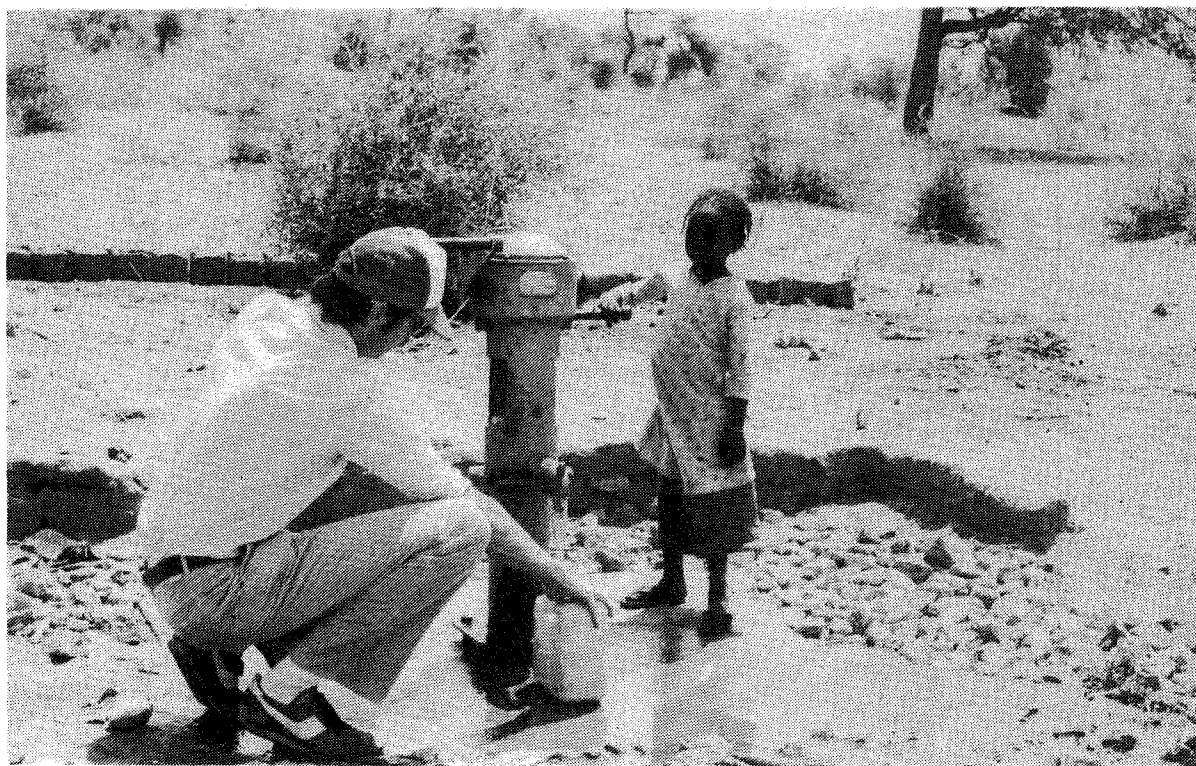


The fenced area contains a nursery and garden plot in Mogode sector.

population densities, competition is keen for good land adjacent to these water sources. The women's cooperatives all have access to very small plots of land near water.

Having previously visited southern Africa, I noticed certain contrasts. In both Zimbabwe and Botswana I had visited horticultural cooperatives, with twelve to fifteen members. These groups had considerably larger garden plots -- perhaps ten to fifteen times the size of the plots of the women's groups in northern Cameroon. The difference in plot size probably exists because of two features present in northern Cameroon: (1) the acute scarcity of land near water, due to higher population densities, and (2) the newness of the women's groups. The project staff does not want the women's plots to expand too rapidly. They believe that the efforts should be on a scale that the women can comfortably sustain.

The women's land tenure rights, however, are not secure. A group in Koza was lent land near a broken pump. Previously the land had been used for a village nursery, but was abandoned when water was unavailable. CARE has repaired the pump. Now the landowner wants the land back at the start of the rainy season, unless the women pay him rent. The extension agent, Odile Yamagay, was unsure of the landowner's motives. Does the man want money, or does he want the land for his wife's millet farming? Perhaps now that there is water, he wants to put in an onion field himself?



Richard Kelly, the CARE Agroforestry Project Coordinator, and a local girl are checking the operation of the pump that CARE repaired, adjacent to one of women's nurseries in the Koza sector.



Visiting a women's nursery and garden in Koza, next to an onion field. Odile Yamagay, on the left, and Marie Djekeldeu on the right, are extension agents. Hama Hamadou Bello, stands between them, and Richard Kelly to the right.

Onions, as well as cotton, are major local cash crops. The Koza region is one of the major onion producers in the country. The onion fields are generally irrigated or watered. Many fields are located next to wells. Usually the farmers have small diesel motors to pump water into the onion fields. (They often purchase these pumps in Nigeria, at much lower prices than they would be charged in Cameroon). Men own and work the onion fields. Often family members, including women, also work in the onion fields.

Both the women cooperative members and project staff members have many ideas about how the cooperatives can expand their activities in the future. In a survey of women cooperative members, the women expressed concern over the scarcity of fuelwood. When one group was first established, the women expressed delight at the idea that they would have access to trees, so that they could grow their own firewood. The project staff has been thinking of perhaps introducing improved fuel-efficient cookstoves in the area, and also of trying to establish women's woodlots.

CARE is considering other ideas, including starting a credit program for the women's cooperatives, training in business management, literacy, and numeracy, and the introduction of grain mills. The new Peace Corps volunteer has a background in small enterprises, and will help the women conduct marketing studies. It may be possible, for example, to develop fruit orchards and then establish a small enterprise canning fruits or making fruit juice.

Another possibility might be to begin to produce forage to sell. Each year hundreds of cattle are driven into northern Cameroon, as the dry season progresses in Chad and they run out of food. Generally the cattle remain in Cameroon for several months. After the rains begin and the grass grows, the cattle are fattened up and driven across the border to markets in Nigeria. Some livestock owners might be willing to purchase feed for their animals, to be able to get them to market earlier and get better prices for them.

CARE's work with the women in northern Cameroon considers local social constraints. The women in northern Cameroon differ considerably from women in other regions of Cameroon.

In reviewing women's opportunities in Cameroon, Barbara Howald and Barbara Wycoff-Baird (1989) found that for northern Cameroon:

- o a small proportion (6.9 percent) of the farm operators are women;
- o a low proportion (31 percent, as compared with 80-90 percent in some other regions) of women sell produce;
- o female literacy is low (less than 30 percent of the primary students are female, and only about 12 percent of the general secondary students are women); and
- o women have a significant involvement in the livestock sector.

They also highlight the importance of looking at different groups of women: Muslim women, for example, rarely market produce or attend secular schools. Howald and Wycoff-Baird believe, however, that the CARE project shows possibilities of doing development work with northern women, despite these larger social constraints.

As elsewhere in Cameroon, legal constraints influence the economic activities of northern women. According to Cameroonian laws, a husband may forbid his wife from working outside the home if he believes that it will adversely affect the family's welfare. The husband must give permission for his wife to obtain credit, although she bears sole responsibility for any business debts that she incurs. By tradition, women did not own nor inherit land. While it is now possible for women to buy land, it is difficult to do so, and thus few women own land. The Women's Affairs Unit in the Ministry of Social Affairs is hoping to change some of these legal constraints (Howald and Wycoff-Baird 1989).

As the CARE project has found out, women generally will seek their husbands' permission first before joining a cooperative. To date, no Muslim women have joined any CARE cooperatives. While it is difficult for individual women to obtain land, it is easier for women as a group to get access to land.

This project is interesting in several respects. First, the original idea of the project was to develop the women's activities as a sub-component of the larger forestry project. CARE expected that, over time, these activities would be integrated into the larger forestry project. Experience has suggested, however, that the best way to promote women's participation in northern Cameroon is to work with women apart from the men.

This situation holds for both the women extension agents and the women farmers. For the extension agents, initially both female and male extension agents were trained together. In a mixed group, the women were hesitant to speak up, and the men had dominated the session. In addition, the male agents had tended to view the women agents as potential sexual conquests, rather than as professional colleagues. This had created a certain amount of tension between the women and the men.

Hama Hamadou Bello explained that the training had gone much better after separating the women agents from the men agents. Although shy at first, with experience and training the women have become more confident and outspoken. Hama believes that the women agents are highly motivated and committed to their jobs, and show more initiative than do the men agents. Given local customs, women agents can work more easily with women farmers than could men agents.

In other regions of Cameroon, a much longer history of cooperatives exists, and women have more experience working with men technical extension agents. It may be that working with women extension agents is a necessary intermediate step, before women will feel comfortable working with men (Tjip Walker, personal communication 1989; Howald and Wycoff-Baird 1989). Hama Hamadou Bello said that the women cooperative members have gradually gotten used to him, when he visits the groups with the women extension agents.

Women farmers had been overlooked in the original project. They have responded very enthusiastically to the creation of cooperatives. Initially the women said that they would do whatever the project staff suggested. Now they are developing their own ideas for other cooperative activities. Some groups have expressed interest in obtaining loans so that they could purchase and operate small mills, to grind millet.

Local men generally support the women's efforts. The women have worked out arrangements with local men for access to land. The husbands of the cooperative members are glad that their wives are earning more income, or growing fruit trees that may contribute to future family income.



This experience also demonstrates the advantages of grouping development efforts in a particular region. The efforts of CARE, and other organizations, to develop water sources has aided the women's cooperatives. Presumably also CARE's health and nutrition project has helped women take on other activities, as they and their children may be sick less often. The cooperative project will, in turn, help to improve local nutrition, by increasing the availability of fruits and vegetables. The combined impact of these projects is greater than the sum of their parts -- and is significantly improving the lives of local women, men, and their children.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

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Forest and Society Fellow

Acknowledgments:

I appreciate the help of numerous CARE staff members, in explaining project activities to me. Richard Kelly and Hama Hamadou Bello were particularly helpful and hospitable when I visited the project in Mokolo. Tjip Walker, of USAID, also provided some useful comparative insights, based on his research in western Cameroon.

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