

The process of democratic opening in Cameroon

# Farmers' organizations in political dialogue

*Cameroon's process of democratic opening, ongoing since the beginning of the 1990s, has gradually changed the relationship between the state and the farmers' organizations, which are becoming accepted as partners in political dialogue. Nonetheless, the extent to which the farmers' organizations are able to influence the country's politics remains to be seen.*

Cameroon's process of democratic opening – whether it is inspired by political will or imposed by the global political situation – has changed the relationship between politics and rural organizations and, indeed, individual farmers (see box). A democratization process is undoubtedly under way, both within the farmers' organizations and in their relationship with the state.

Despite all the difficulties they face, the farmers' organizations are developing a relatively positive internal dynamic. Although there are some dictatorial tendencies – supported by retired civil servants who are attempting to harness this new form of social organization for their own purposes – it is generally evident from the way in which decisions are being taken, debates are conducted, office-holders appointed and, indeed, sanctions are imposed against them, that the farmers' organizations are increasingly operating in line with democratic principles.

## Farmers' organizations and the state – a democratic obstacle race

In Cameroon today, no official events with a rural connection take place without the – highly visible – presence of the farmers' organizations. But the question is whether this genuinely testifies to their status, or whether the state is merely exploiting the new structures to cultivate its own image or – more cynically – pursue commercial interests. A further issue is how the farmers' organizations, for their part, are responding to the overtures being made by political decision-makers. Especially surprising is the political class's abrupt change of attitude towards a population group which, until very recently, was still regarded as «the common people», «the farmers» or simply «the governees». From the farmers' perspective, the fact that non-government organizations (NGOs) have assumed some government functions – such as subsidizing agricultural production – has lessened the state's omnipotence. As a consequence, the fledgling farmers' organizations, with

strong backing from the NGOs, have progressively transformed themselves into respectable – and respected – partners in political dialogue.

Of course, after just ten years, it is difficult to cite examples showing that the arguments presented by the farmers' organizations are having a growing influence on political decisions, but this process is nonetheless taking place.

One example relates to the occupational organizations which were formed during, and especially after, the dissolution of the state enterprises that had been set up to develop specific agricultural sectors. There was very little reaction to any of the attempts made by farmers and the former employees of these defunct state enterprises to build new structures on the remnants of these organizations and continue their projects and initiatives. Nonetheless, in some cases the authorities – under pressure from the farmers' organizations – amended their timetable for the dissolution of the state enterprises, thus offer-

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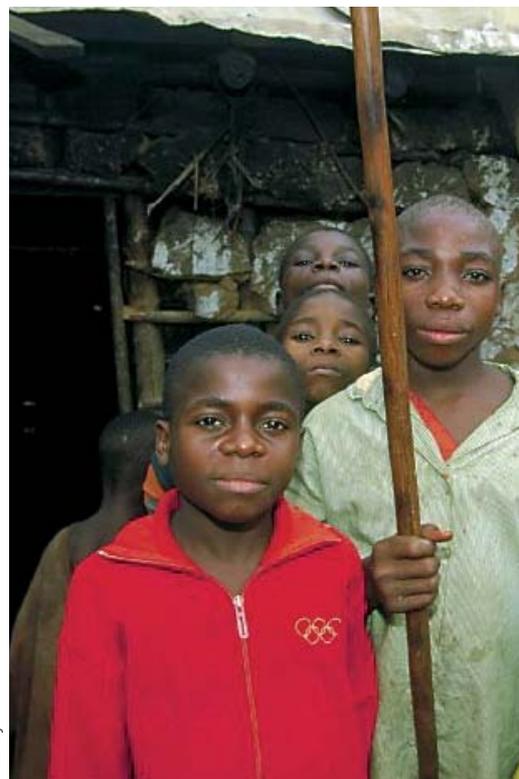


Photo: Ioff

ing some measure of security, albeit temporarily. This is what happened with the former «Société de développement du riz de Santchou» (Society for the Development of Rice Cultivation in Santchou – SODERIM) in western Cameroon, for example.

There are also examples of a continuing lack of democratic awareness: in the cocoa sector, for example, the authorities have set a production target of 200,000 tonnes by 2010, compared with just 100,000 tonnes at present. Another highly topical example is the management of the resources freed by the HIPC Initiative, which provides debt relief for the heavily indebted poor countries. In the teeth of concerted opposition from the state-run and private media, these funds are being managed in line with the archaic methods deployed before independence. No effort is being made to seek the opinions of beneficiaries, even when these are farmers' organizations operating in a supposedly democratic context.

### Farmers' organizations – not yet equal partners in political dialogue

Despite all the setbacks, the farmers' movement is now irreversible and is essential for the future of rural regions. The farmers' organizations can congratulate themselves on the – albeit modest – outcomes achieved so far. But they are still not recognized as equal partners in politi-

cal dialogue, nor do they enjoy complete trust as yet. Farmers' organizations are often seen – even by farmers themselves – as ad hoc alliances of convenience, from which farmers seek to derive the

greatest possible benefit but in which they are often in a weak negotiating position owing to their economic status. Politicians, for their part, are bent on splitting the movement, diverting it from its goals or even destroying it. In the cocoa sector, for example, there are numerous organizations speaking on behalf of and with the farmers, without any actual benefit accruing to them.

And yet there are still grounds for optimism. Through their production and marketing initiatives, the organized farmers are achieving successes which were inconceivable during 25 years of state subsidies and centralized management. For example, a farmers' organization in Lékié, some 100 km west of Yaoundé, has been able to purchase agricultural equipment worth more than 150 000 000 CFA francs, whereas the state pledged to contribute only 50 000 000 CFA francs in subsidies for this purpose. This is undoubtedly the type of initiative which farmers' organizations must pursue if they are to take their place as equal partners at the negotiating

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table opposite the politicians. Once they have achieved some measure of economic independence, they will then be able to exert influence – directly or indirectly – over rural policy.

Farmers are increasingly recognizing that the days of subsidies are well and truly over. Self-help is the imperative now. A new type of farmer is gradually emerging: independent, even rebellious, and critical of politicians and their verbose speeches and empty pledges. This raises hopes that a new quality will emerge in the relations between farmers and the state – one which is already evident when elections take place.

### 1995: A change in tone

Ten years ago, the President of the Republic of Cameroon decided to distribute Ridomil Plus®, a fungicide widely used in cocoa cultivation, to his country's cocoa farmers. The Prime Minister, who was charged with the task of distributing the President's gift, decided to involve the now defunct «Conseil des fédérations paysannes du Cameroun» (Council of Farmers' Associations of Cameroon – CFPC) in the project.

Farmer Jean Mbarga, a CFPC representative who was sent to visit the north-west of the country, was unhappy with the way in which the government authorities were managing the distribution process. In a letter to the Prime Minister, he complained about the high-handed tone adopted by the officials in their dealings with farmers, which in his view was reminiscent of a bygone age.

In 1995 – just two or three years after the launch of efforts to bring about a democratic opening in Cameroon – a complaint such as Mbarga's was still seen as an intolerable affront to the government. Yet no accusation was levelled against Jean Mbarga by any side. Nor was he summoned by the police or the state secret service to discuss «a matter pertaining to him».



The farmers' representatives of tomorrow: Will the state and politicians accept them as equal partners in dialogue so that they can influence political decision-making in their country?