

BU/MBENGKAS RICE COOPERATIVE SOCIETY LIMITED AND LAIMBWE'S ECONOMY (CAMEROON), 1973-2014

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Introduction

The reunification of British Southern Cameroons with the Cameroun Republic on 1 October 1961 to form the Federal Republic of Cameroon of two equal states of West and East Cameroon eventually necessitated the initiators to introduce political and socio-economic reforms for the country's socio-economic advancement (Ngoh 1987, 243-259). Ahidjo introduced the Five Years Development Plans in 1960 to transform the country and also launched the "Green Revolution" in 1973 with the main objective of reviving agriculture, especially food production in Cameroon (Ngoh 1987, 270-271). This government action was felt in the Menchum Division when with the collaboration of the German government, the Cameroon government created the Wum Area Development Authority (WADA) in 1975 (Kai 2018, 110). The work of WADA led it to help set up the BMRCS Ltd. to help improve the lot of Laimbwe rice farmers³.

Laimbwe is a matrilineal kinship group spread across the Menchum and Boyo Divisions including Bu, Mbengkas, and Baiso. Other matri-kin groups in the Menchum and Boyo Divisions are Kuk, Kom (the largest of them all), Aghem, Bafmeng, and other groups in the Fungom area. This study on the Laimbwe people is premised on this key question: How successful

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³ BMRCS Ltd Archives, Rice Processing Project BMRCS Wum Central Sub-Division, Menchum Division North West Province, 2006, 1.

was BMRCS Ltd in promoting socio-economic development in the Laimbwe villages of Bu and Mbengkas? The question will be addressed at the end of this paper. We begin the paper by conceptualising and contextualising relevant concepts.

Conceptual framework

Cooperative as a concept is derived from cooperation meaning joint operation, action, or practice of cooperating. It is used differently in different contexts. Although scholars of integration have used cooperation and integration interchangeably there is a fundamental difference between the two. Integration refers to a much more formal arrangement involving some political and economic sacrifices as well as commitments, concessions, processes, and political will to redefine participation in the national, continental and international economy (Axline 1979, 23). Cooperation on the other hand may be employed to identify loose forms of inter-state activity designed to meet some common needs of a particular society (Adetula 2004, 4-5).

Cooperative involves joint activity or action of two or more groups or organisations with the aim of initiating change or development in a given economy within a given period of time (Chambers Universal Learners Dictionary 1980, 325). It also means working with others to attain a common goal, benefit, or accommodate differences for an agreement (Macmillan English Dictionary 2002, 119). In the context of this study, a cooperative is a jointly owned agricultural or commercial enterprise usually organised by farmers or consumers to produce and distribute goods and services. It is run for the benefit of its owners or partners and those making use of its services.

The concept of ethnic group is derived from the Greek word *ethnos* meaning “more precisely” and Latin *ethnicus* virtually meaning the same thing (Tonkin et al 1989, 11-17). In the mid-19th Century, the word ethnic became associated with pagan or heathen. The term took on a meaning comparable to the concept now expressed as an ethnic group, mostly translated as “nation people”. The terms ethnic group and ethnic character were first recorded in 1935 and 1952 respectively and became part of the Oxford English Dictionary in 1972 (Ronald 1978, 379). Ethnic group has had multiple definitions and it is historically and culturally a related group or community of people with the same conviction, common identity and common fate. It addresses issues related to origin, kinship ties, tradition, cultural uniqueness, a shared history, and possibly a shared language (Alex 2011, 61). In this sense, an ethnic group

is a nation including the Bamileke, Bamoun, Bakweri, Bakossi, Bali, Bafut, Ewondo, Kom, Douala, Nso, Mankon, Aghem, and Laimbwe among others in Cameroon (Fanso 2017, 24).

The word Laimbwe literally means “I say or I am saying” and does not only refer to the ethnic group but also to the language spoken by people of the three villages of Baisso, Bu, Mbengkas, and to a lesser extent satellite ethnic groups like Mughom, Teitengem, Endeng, Mbongkesso and Aguli (Kah 2013, 65). A centralised system or a state political organisation is a society with a recognized ruler or paramount at the centre who holds power and wields supreme political authority (Fanso 2017, 1-2). This political organisation constitutes a defined geographical territory, sovereignty, or an independent government and an administration made up of a chief, King, or some paramount ruler who controls the executive, legislative, and judicial structure of government. A matrilineal system is one where inheritance and succession are from father to uterine brother(s) and to the sisters' son or nephew with preference given to the eldest. The family lineage is traced from the mother's line and sons succeed their maternal uncles and not their fathers (Kah 2015).

Situating Laimbwe ethnic group

The Laimbwe ethnic group is located in the Northwest region of Cameroon. The polity is spread across the boundary between Menchum and Boyo divisions. It is made up of three villages namely Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso. The Laimbwe ethnic group is bordered to the north and northeast by Aghem and Kuk, to the east and southeast by Mmen (Bafmeng), Kom and Mughom, in the west and southwest by Esimbi and Bafut ethnic groups. The population of the Laimbwe ethnic group is more than 20,000 inhabitants with Bu having a population of more than 12,000 people (Kai 2018, 20). Laimbwe polities are endowed with lots of exploitable forests and numerous resources. The territory also has extensive attractive grassland scenery where cattle and sheep rearing takes place, raffia palm bushes in valley groves, natural palm trees, fertile alluvial valleys, and numerous rivers and streams rich in fish, tadpoles, sand, and stones. The extensive undulating terrain is backed by a moderate climate congenial for cattle herding and market gardening (Kah 2013, 60). Laimbwe was part of Bamenda Division during the mandate period (1922-1946) and part of Wum Division during the trusteeship era (1948-1961). When divisions were created and others renamed in 1968 during the Federal Republic, Bu and Mbengkas were administered

as part of Menchum. Mbengkas came under the suzerainty of Njinikom when a sub-division was created in 1972 with headquarters in Njinikom. The territory was later administered from Fondong when the headquarters was moved from Njinikom and in 1992 with the creation of Boyo Division from Menchum Division; Mbengkas remained under the new division and sub-division.

The Laimbwe, like other ethnic groups in the Northwest Region of Cameroon, are semi-Bantu-speaking people (Ewi 2007; 2008, 8). They belong specifically to the Tikar-speaking people who trace their origin to Ndobo and Bankim in the North (Adamawa Region) of Cameroon, their ancestral home (Amaazee 1964, 54-56). The socio-political structure of Laimbwe villages is centralised and it is a matrilineal kinship with inheritance traced to the woman. It is similar in many respects to that of the matrilineal fondoms of Kom, Kuk, and Bafmeng. *Laimbwe* as a language of the people is spoken in Bu, Mbengkas, and Baisso, the three main villages that make up the Laimbwe ethnic group (Kah 2013, 59). The language is also spoken in other villages that share boundaries with the Laimbwe villages including Mughom, Endeng, Teitengem, Aguli, and Mbongkesso. While the neighbouring villages of Mughom, Endeng, Teitengem, and Aguli speak a variant of the Widikum language, Mbongkesso blends *Laimbwe* and *Itanghi-Kom*. This is a result of the settlement of Laimbwe and Kom people here which is at the edge of the Kom/Wum Forest Reserve. The Laimbwe people cultivate food and cash crops like maize, cocoyams, rice, beans, bananas, coffee, etc. They also engage in related activities like hunting, pig and goat rearing, lumbering, and fishing.

Origin of the BMRCs Ltd

The desire by Ahidjo's government to encourage the decentralisation of agricultural projects to provinces, divisions, and ethnic groups of the then United Republic of Cameroon through the launch of Five Years Development Plans eventually led to the creation of the BMRCs Ltd. The launching of the Green Revolution and the first agricultural show in Buea in 1973 (Ngoh 1987, 249) also facilitated the process. It was aimed at encouraging farmers to compete to increase food production.

The BMRCs Ltd was created in 1975 barely two years after the launch of the "Green Revolution" by President Ahmadou Ahidjo. At the time Chu Mbonghekang was Fon of Bu and Kei Fon of Mbengkas (Kah 2012, 148). It survived the tempest in Bu after the death of Chu Mbonghekang through David

Bwai Awah, Bonghezee II, and Ndo Muam's competition for village headship. Other cooperative societies opened around the same time as the BMRCS Ltd, including Esimbi, Esu, Yemngeh, and Aguli-Ebiate. All these were affiliates of WADA whose headquarters was in Wum. The BMRCS Ltd was officially registered in 1994 following registration No. NW/CO/011/94/179 of 25th July, 1994. It was also registered in the North West Provincial Register of the Ministry of Agriculture as (COOP/CIG) No. NW/CO/01/94/179 on the 14th February 1994⁴. This was in compliance with Law No. 92/06 of 14th August 1992, relating to cooperative societies and common initiative groups with the decree of application No. 92/455/PM of 23rd November, 1992⁵.

The active farming population of Bu from the creation of the BMRCS was 7,000 and that of Mbengkas was 3,762. Annual output was over 780,100 kg of rice but registered members of the cooperative were only 145 including three workers, eight board members, and five supervisors⁶. The first chairman was Mr. Koi Clement Chembei, ably assisted by Messrs Ngeh Pius and Akou Nathaniel (Akuh 2018). The cooperative had a manager to manage its day-to-day operations, a board of directors, supervisors, and committee members who performed assigned tasks. The term of office for positions was three years with unlimited renewable. Executive board meetings are held every three months and general sessions annually⁷.

Choice of Laimbwe land for Rice Cooperative Society

Paddy rice cultivation and other food and cash crops are the main economic activities of the Laimbwe people. The rice belt extends along the Meteh and Menchum River valleys to include other settlements like Obang, Mughom, and Aguli. Prior to the creation of the BMRCS Ltd, upland rice farming was in Bu by 1953 (Kah 2015, 226).

The origin of BMRCS Ltd was a result of the fact that the territory was endowed with natural resources like good climate, fertile soils (alluvial, hydro-morphic, clay, lateritic, silt, ferruginous, loam, ferritic, and sandy soils), friendly topography, good drainage system, vegetation and relief (Kah 2001, 2-61).

⁴ BMRCS Ltd Archives, Report on the Evaluation Workshops Held in Bu- Mbengkas Rice Cooperative Society Limited Head Office Bu, 30th June 2001, 1-20..

⁵ BMRCS Ltd Archives, File No. 01, Registration Certificate/ Provincial Register (COOP/CIG) No. NW/CO/01/94/179 on 14th February 1994, Bamenda, 1994.

⁶ Ibid., 3.

⁷ Rice Processing Project, BMRCS, 4.

All the rich natural resources, especially soil, enabled rice farming among other local and cash crops. Rice cultivation policies in Laimbwe between 1953 and 1975 were outstanding and this encouraged the Cameroon government to extend the Green Revolution to this part of the country through WADA.

The concretization of the creation of this institution in Laimbwe land was the result of Ahidjo's economic development plans of the 1970s and the Green Revolution of 1973 (Fanso 2017, 34). The Cameroon government wanted to revive Cameroon's economy through increased food production and also to encourage a competitive spirit among farmers and promote sustainability in agriculture. This was done through the organisation of regular pastoral shows. The first was in Buea in 1973. President Ahidjo created a farmers' bank, the National Fund for Rural Development (FONADER in French). It granted loans to farmers at a low-interest rate of 8% and the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) championed agricultural projects. Through WADA, pastoral shows were organised in Wum town, and Laimbwe products at these shows necessitated an extension of the rice industry to the area.

The objective of this cooperative from inception was to receive quality paddy rice from members or users, weigh, and hull. It was also to market the rice produced by members at the most profitable price, enhance rice production through the supply of farm inputs such as improved seeds and fertilisers in the form of credits to members, and provide infrastructures like dams, canals, roads, stores, warehouses, among others within the limits of available funds⁸.

Furthermore, the creation of BMRCS Ltd was to increase the investment and income level of Laimbwe indigenes especially farmers through rice processing (Ngoobi 2018). The increasing demand for rice in and out of Cameroon also encouraged the Cameroon government to use WADA and decentralise its agricultural industry (Ambei 2018). This was simply because rice was becoming a fast, easy, and common food in the nation and the world at large. The rice brand was also used for animal feed, especially for pigs, goats, fowls, and other domestic animals and birds.

The establishment of BMRCS Ltd was for the acquisition and installation of new rice species and the brand. It was also to recruit and build the capacity of members on management skills and operation of the new rice huller⁹. Laimbwe people were to be encouraged to massively engage in rice farming and later on skilled labour would be made available to step up

⁸ BMRCS Ltd Archives, Article of Association for Bu-Mbengkas Rice Cooperative Society Ltd.

⁹ Rice Processing Project BMRCS, 8.

rice production in this area. There was a need to increase rice production through mechanisation schemes. In an interview with Ndangoh Mathias, he intimated that:

[...] Bu Rice Farmers Cooperative (BRIFACOOOP) was set up as a process of marketing a warehouse for storage, processing, and marketing of rice in Bu/Mbengkas, Wum Central Sub-Division with the support of local farming groups in Partnership with WADA and the Cameroon government led by the ministry of Agricultural and Rural Development and International Fund for Agricultural Development (FIDA), a UN Agency [...] (Ndangoh 2018, n.p.).

The desire to create a warehouse in order to preserve rice in Laimbwe land for future use through distribution to meet local needs encouraged agricultural experts from WADA to oversee the creation of the BMRCS Ltd. This rice cooperative also came into being as a way of encouraging cooperative farming in the Menchum Division, particularly in the Wum area under the supervision of WADA. This scheme would promote solidarity and sharing of expertise between farmers to increase output. This could go a long way to help Laimbwe people apply for loans, invest in farming, take care of daily needs, and develop their villages.

The Cameroon government working with WADA set up the rice cooperative in Laimbwe land to create jobs and encourage farmers to obtain shares and membership in agribusiness and register in the National Employment Fund (Towah 2018). It was also to ensure easy collection of taxes and to raise money for loans for projects as deemed necessary by the General Assembly, Executive Committee, and Board of Directors of the cooperative. There was equally the need to construct farm-to-market roads, especially from the rice valley to ease the evacuation of rice and other crops. Above all, the establishment of the BMRCS Ltd was to decongest the hauling mills in WADA and facilitate the processing of rice in other parts of the Menchum Division.

Organization and evolution of BMRCS Ltd

The BMRCS Ltd was structured into the General Assembly, Management, Executive, Operational, Supervisory committees, and farming groups. The General Assembly was made up of shareholders and farmers. It held meetings once annually and in June. During the meeting, there was an evalua-

tion of activities of the previous years and projections for the coming seasons and years. Elections were also conducted during the General Assembly during the election year. The Management Committee was made up of a lead manager, a board of directors of 9 members, and 5 supervisory committee members. All members of this committee were drawn from Bu and Mbengkas (Ndang 2018).

The executive committee consisted of the president and vice, secretary, treasurer, board members, technical advisers, and a legal officer. The executive bureau had a mandate of 3 years renewable without limit¹⁰. Members of the executive committee were charged with day to day activities of the cooperative, making sure that the needs of farmers, shareholders, customers, partners, and the entire Laimbwe community were met. Board meetings were held every 3 months to deliberate on the functioning and impact of the cooperative. There was an extraordinary meeting in December to evaluate and plan for the coming year¹¹.

The operational committee consisted of the board of directors or management committee, animation committee, operators, marketing agents, and the supervisory committee¹². This committee repaired and maintained possessions of the cooperative like the warehouse, offices, drying plateau, hauling mill, farming equipment, proposed projects, and managed funding, marketing, expenditure, and income of the cooperative. The supervisory committee had five members who monitored, evaluated, and controlled the material and financial transactions of cooperative activities during each farming season. They also collaborated with other cooperative development partners of BMRCs Ltd and shareholders, farming groups, and individual farmers in Laimbwe land to ensure that the objectives of the cooperative were met.

The organisational structure notwithstanding, the cooperative operated from 1975 to 2014 under a well-defined leadership. It collapsed for several reasons. The table below shows the leadership of the cooperative from the beginning to its collapse.

¹⁰ BMRCs Ltd Archives, Minutes of Bu-Mbengkas Rice Cooperative General Assembly Meeting, 2nd January 2013, by Toh Denis Koi, Secretary.

¹¹ Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 1.

¹² Ibid., 2.

Table 1: Exco members of BMRCS Ltd, 1975-2014

Year/Term of Office	Post/Function	Name	Origin/Village
1975-1978	President/Chairman	Koi Clement Chembei	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Amaazee Michael	Bu
	Secretary General	Muh Andrew Songhi	Bu
	Treasurer	Martin Mbah	Bu
	Manager	John Fangha	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Kenguh Isei Amaazee	Bu
1978-1981	President/Chairman	Kenguh Isei Amaazee	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Ngobi Bamenda	Bu
	Secretary General	Muh Andrew Songhi	Bu
	Treasurer	Toh Gabriel e Elias Ngowei (Vice)	Bu
	Manager	Akuh George Ngong	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Ambei John, etc.	Bu
1981-1984	President/Chairman	Ambei John Fangha	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Kang David	Bu
	Secretary General	Muh Andrew Songhi	Bu
	Treasurer	Bong Ben Kenwah	Bu
	Manager	Akuh George Ngong	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Wanjuh Alfred, Esah Samson Ngong, etc.	Mbengkas e Bu
1984-1990	President/Chairman	Wanjuh Alfred	Mbengkas
	Vice President/Chair	Esah Samson Ngong e Akuh George Ngong	Bu
	Secretary General	Ngeh Pius Ndong	Bu
	Treasurer	Bah Mathias	Bu
	Manager	Towah Joshua Che, Ndong Ebenezer Fung	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu

	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Towah Joshua Che	Bu
1990-1993	President/Chairman	Kamsang Martin Ngeh	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Ngeh Pius Ndang	Bu
	Secretary General	Toh Denis Koi	Bu
	Treasurer	Bah Mathias	Bu
	Manager	Toh Zacks Kelah	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Towah Joshua Che	Bu
1993-1996	President/Chairman	Towah Joshua Che	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Muam Abel	Mbengkas
	Secretary General	Ngeh Pius Ndang	Bu
	Treasurer	Kah Elias	Bu
	Manager	Toh Denis Koi	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Muh Griffith Kang, Chi Aaron, Wabi Paul, Wango Christina, Amei Clement	Bu e Mbengkas
1996-1999	President/Chairman	Wango Stephen Fang	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Ngoh Jonathan Mbwai, Kamsang Martin Ngeh	Bu
	Secretary General	Muh Griffith Kang	Bu
	Treasurer	Ndong Eric, Kah Andreas Mungang, Ngam John	Bu
	Manager	Ndang Ebenezer Fung	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Mbi Marcel, Koi George, Songhi Pus, etc.	Bu
1999-2002	President/Chairman	Ndong Johnson Ndong	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Ngoh Jonathan Mbwai	Bu
	Secretary General	Toh Zacks Kelah	Bu
	Treasurer	Koi George Kui	Bu
	Manager	Ndang Ebenezer Fung	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu

	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Afuh William Kui, Ngong Jonathan Ngum, Mbi Marcel e Kamsang Martin Ngeh	Bu e Mbengkas
2003-2009	President/Chairman	Kamsang Martin Ngeh	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Toh Denis Koi	Bu
	Secretary General	Toh Zachs Kelah	Bu
	Treasurer	Ngum John	Bu
	Manager	Ndang Ebenezer Fung	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Kui William	Bu
2010-2013	President/Chairman	Ngong Mercy	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Abkou Nathaniel	Mbengkas
	Secretary General	Toh Denis Koi	Bu
	Treasurer	Koi George Kui	Bu
	Manager	Akuh George Ngong	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Ngong Jonathan e Ngong Jonathan	Bu e Mbengkas
2013-2014	President/Chairman	Muh Griffith Kang	Bu
	Vice President/Chair	Muh Samuel	Bu
	Secretary General	Toh Denis Koi	Bu
	Treasurer	Tchi Belina	Bu
	Manager	Toh Zachs Kelah	Bu
	Legal Officer	Amaazee Anthony Amah	Bu
	Technical Adviser/ Board Member	Akuh George Ngong e Kui William	Bu

Source: BMRCs Ltd Archives, File No. 01, Minutes of Meeting 17th February 1981; Minutes of Meeting 18th December 1981, Minutes of Board Meeting 10 November 1982; Minutes of the General Administration, Minutes of the Cooperation Development Meeting at the Extension Service Wum, 18th February 1987; Registration Certificate/Provincial Register (COOP/CIG) No. NW/CO/01/94/179 on 14th February 1994 Bamenda; Interview with Towah Joshua Che, Ndang Ebenezer Fung and Akuh George Ngong (Former Managers of BMRCs Ltd) Bu, 27th July, 2018.

Projects and partnership

Projects of BMRCS Ltd were initiated by board members, the executive committee, management committee, shareholders, partners and WADA. These were aimed at transforming agricultural produce in Laimbwe land. The logical framework of BMRCS Ltd projects took into consideration global and specific objectives, activities and expected results, indicators, resources and partners. The global objective was to raise income levels of members of the BMRCS Ltd through the processing of rice¹³. In more specific terms, the cooperative was to acquire and install new rice machinery, build capacity of members on management techniques, increase rice production to about 2000 tons annually, increase quality of rice hulled from 360 tons to about 1,000 tons annually, and rice brand from 8 to 12 tons per year.

From creation in 1975, the first project was to establish the head office of BMRCS Ltd building, hulling mill, a warehouse and a drying plateau. Other projects were to train farmers, equip them with farming tools, grant loans, and initiate partnerships with external and internal agricultural agencies, other cooperatives and farming groups¹⁴. There was also a plan to construct a motorable road to the rice farm, provide farmers with seeds and fertilisers, promote mass participation of Laimbwe indigenes in agriculture, increase processing, management, marketing and income of the cooperative. Some projects of the BMRCS Ltd between 1996 and 2006 included operating SATAKE rice huller worth 1,800,000 FCFA, road maintenance in Bu village, 7,500,000 FCFA, support for Mbengkas road maintenance project worth 200,000 FCFA, construction of a laboratory building in the Bu Health Centre, 20,600,000 FCFA and water supply to Bu village, 2,000,000 FCFA¹⁵.

To realize these projects, BMRCS Ltd signed partnerships with external and internal agricultural institutions, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, other cooperatives, farming groups and individuals. Some internal and national partners were Laimbwe individual farmers (shareholders), farming groups, Esimbi, Yemngeh, Esu, and Aguli-Ebiate Cooperatives, WADA, Aghem Cooperative Credit Union Limited¹⁶, Bamenda Accounting and Management Centre (BAMCCIG), Menchum Integrated Rural Development Project (MIRUDEP), Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development, National Employment Fund (NEF), the Centre for Agribusiness

¹³ Rice Processing Project BMRCs, 6-10.

¹⁴ Ibid., 12.

¹⁵ Ibid., 3.

¹⁶ Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 2.

and Rural Development (CARD), *Projet d'Appui au Développement des Filières Agricole/Commodity Value-chain Development Support Project (PADFA)* (Ndangoh 2018) and *Appui aux Stratégies Paysannes et à la Professionnalization de l'Agriculture/the Support Programme to Farmers Strategies and Professionalization of Agriculture (ASPPA)*¹⁷.

International partnerships included the International Fund for Agricultural Development (FIDA), the International Development Fund (IDF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It should be noted that MIRUDEP, NEF, ASPPA and UNDP were the main partners that financed projects and trained farmers of BMRCS Ltd. According to recommendations of the service organization of BMRCS Ltd:

[...] we strongly recommend that ASPPA assistance to the cooperative be restricted to punctual intervention to accompany the cooperative in the implementation of the resolutions of the Evaluation General Assembly of 30th June 2001. It is essential that the service organisation retain works closely with the cooperative to implant group commercialisation of rice using the loan from the Aghem Credit Union [...]¹⁸.

Furthermore, Mr Ngeh Martin (Chairman of BMRCS Ltd) recognized the support and services of MIRUDEP, National Employment Fund and UNDP by stating that:

[...] thanks to MIRUDEP in partnership with BMRCS Ltd. The creation of agricultural post which has [sic] greeted with a sigh of relief by the farming population. Our sincere thanks to UNDP Bafoussam for granting us a rice huller for quality clean rice and mass production. Our special thanks to the National Employment Fund for playing [sic] a lion share for mass production of quality rice in our region in agricultural sector. Like an infant who will suck the mother's breast and still need water to drink [...]¹⁹.

¹⁷ BMRCS Ltd Archives, File No. 015, Description Project of IDF/ASPPA, December 2000, Consulted on 28th July, 2018.

¹⁸ Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 4.

¹⁹ BMRCS Ltd Archives, A Welcome Speech Presented by the Chairman of Board of Directors (Kamsang Martin Ngeh) of BMRCS Ltd on Behalf of the Entire Farming Population of Bu/Mbengkas on the Maiden Handing over of Farming Equipment to Farmers of Bu and Mbengkas, 13th December, 2007.

The reaction of the Chairman of the BMRCs Ltd revealed that in spite of several national and international partners who supported the cooperative, there was a need for more.

Budgeting, funding, marketing, processing, income/revenue

The main sources of funding for BMRCs Ltd came from hulling charges, sale of rice bran, registration, and purchase of shares, grants from individuals, national and international partners, loans from credit unions and credit from loans. For instance, to be a member, an individual registered with 500 FCFA and shares ranged from 1,000-5,000 FCFA annually. Farmers also took loans from the cooperative ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 FCFA payable in kilograms of rice at the end of each farming season (Akuh 2018).

On 6th November 2003, the chairman of the cooperative applied and obtained a loan of 350,000 FCFA from the Aghem Cooperative Credit Union with the aim of servicing and purchasing some spare parts of their hulling machine in preparation for the peak harvesting season in December 2003²⁰. The BMRCs Ltd had a credit account No. 566 in the Aghem Cooperative Credit Union Ltd, created in 1991. Another account No. 3709 was created on September 24 2007²¹. Other accounts included No. 5433 created with Aghem Cooperative Credit Union Ltd, and a current account No. 100230001000111000009 12 with Union Bank Bamenda on 5 February 2013²².

In 2006, the total budget of BMRCs Ltd was 5,741,000 FCFA, and UNDP contributed 4,070,000 FCFA while BMRCs Ltd raised the remaining amount of 1,671,000 FCFA²³. The cooperative had an annual budget that ranged between 2 million and 6 million FCFA.

The marketing of BMRCs Ltd produce was done within and out of the Laimbwe ethnic group. A majority of rice and rice brands were sold in Wum and Bamenda towns. About 35 and 8 bags of rice were bought by ASPPA in

20 BMRCs Ltd Archives, An Application for a Loan Presented by Ndang Johnson Ndong to the Aghem Cooperative Credit Union, 6th November, 2013.

21 BMRCs Ltd Archives, UNDP Funding Project Document Ref. No. 7A/P/95/06/06 AND Ref. No. CMR 50/048/09/07/CRB of 31st August, 2007.

22 BMRCs Ltd Archives, Attestation of Account Number Presented to the Assistant Manager of Aghem Cooperative Credit Union Limited, Kedzi Gerald Kom by the Manager of BMRCs Ltd, Akuh George Ngong on 5th February, 2013.

23 Rice Processing Project, BMRCs, 16.

1999/2000 and 2000/2001 respectively²⁴. Between 1999 and 2001, 224 and 185 tons of rice were processed respectively. In 1991 and 1996, BMRCs Ltd realised a profit at an interest rate of 1, 1252,140 and 2,600,008 FCFA respectively. Again in 2001 and 2005, the income was 1,028,125 and 755,000 FCFA respectively²⁵.

Expenditure

The income obtained from the turnover of BMRCs Ltd was used on maintenance, funding some projects, giving loans to members especially shareholders and taking care of wages of workers. Some were used for fuel, stationery and documentation, space, rice purchase, transport and travelling expenses, entertainment, raw materials and store consumption, sundry expenses cleaning, overtime, audit fees, feeding and board allowances, hired labour, debts, scale tax charges and purchase of farming equipment²⁶. Total expenditure from 1999-2001 for instance was 4,448,800 FCFA, while from 2002 -2005, it decreased to 502,355 FCFA due to effective management. In support of this idea Mr Towah stated that:

[...] during my time as manager, my best presidents or chairmen were Wanjuh Alfred and Kamsang Martin Ngeh both from Mbengkas. During the reign of Wanjuh Alfred, they raised about 2.6 million FCFA within 2 years as compared to the 9000 FCFA cash balance that was brought forward by the predecessor, Ambei John Fangha [...] (Towah 2018, n.p.).

This explains why Wanjuh Alfred and Kamsang Martin Ngeh served two mandates each as presidents of BMRCs Ltd. After these two, the cooperative could not raise the money they've previously raised.

²⁴Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 4.

²⁵ Ibid., 5 and BMRCs Ltd, Annual Budget for the Year 2004 and 2005 Presented by Ntang Ebenezer Fung, Manager.

²⁶ BMRCs Ltd Archives, Financial Statement as from 31st May 2004 to 31st May 2005, Presented by Ntang Ebenezer Fung, Manager, on Hulling and Rice Brand.

The cooperative in Laimbwe economy

The establishment of the BMRCS Ltd in the Laimbwe economy in 1975 by the Cameroon government through WADA was a blessing to Bu and Mbengkas villages in particular and other villages and towns in general. Activities of the cooperative led to an increase in production and transformation. For instance, the cooperative experienced an increase in production from 8 to 35 tons of rice between 1999 and 2000 and 224 to 300 tons in 2001²⁷. By 2006, the production rose to about 2000 tons of rice annually. The quantity of rice hulled also increased from 360 to 960 tons and rice brand from 8 to 12 tons per year²⁸. Capacity-building seminars and training were also organized for farmers on modern farming techniques.

Other benefits farmers got included rice hullers, modern farming equipment, seeds, drying plateau, and credit from the cooperative for workers, members and shareholders. The cooperative benefited from hulling machines, a building (head office), a warehouse, a workshop, chairs and wheelbarrows from their partners. Supporting this view Mr. Ndeh Richard (2018) said that:

[...] WADA gave 2 hulling machines, big and small for the start and struggled that the BMRCS Ltd be a multipurpose cooperative but to no avail. WADA also struggled to train the operator and manager of the hulling machines. In case of breakdown, people went to WADA and Aguli to hull their rice. I supported the cooperative with 4 wheelbarrows to fill the foundation of the cooperative [...] (Richard 2018, n.p.).

The cooperative obtained two hulling machines from WADA, bought in England and Japan called Sateke (Towah 2018). Through these rice mills, people no longer pounded rice in mortars with pestles but hulled it. The hulling distance was also reduced as people used to hull rice in WADA more than twelve kilometres away from home.

Members of the cooperative obtained farm tools and other materials like hoes, spades, cutlasses, three fingers, raincoats, boots, dig axes, bags of rice, seeds, fertilisers, buckets, and loans (Sang 2018). Farmers obtained loans and refunded them with bags of rice which cost 5,000 FCFA each. Registered members hulled rice at the rate of 10 francs per kilogram and bought rice brand at a reduced rate of 15 francs per kilogram as compared to 15 and 20

²⁷ Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 4.

²⁸ Rice Processing Project BMRCS, 7-8.

francs per kilogram for non-members for hulling and rice brand respectively (Ndang 2018). Members with shares obtained free dividends, fertiliser, and farming tools and attended board meetings annually (Akuh 2018). Seeds were also given to members each farming season to extend their farm sizes to increase production, income, and the standard of living.

The establishment of the cooperative created employment opportunities especially in the farming sector in Laimbwe land. People were employed over the years to serve as managers, secretaries, treasurers, supervisors, officers, hullers, operators, trainers, selling and distribution agents, and contractors. Pioneer members included Koi Clement Chembei, Flengei Christopher Kah, Muh Andrew Songhi, Ambei John Fangha, Ache Lucas, Wanjuh Alfred, and Kamsang Martin Ngeh. From its creation in 1975 to its collapse in 2014, more than 8,000 jobs were created directly and indirectly by the cooperative (Towah and Akuh 2018). Wages paid workers ranged from 9,000 to 30,000 francs²⁹.

Solidarity through group farming was encouraged especially in Bu and Mbengkas. Farming groups that emerged benefitted from the loan scheme offered by the cooperative. Among these groups were Kpwe Wei Solidarity Farming Group, Eufueh Women Farming Group, Progressive Farming Group II Bu, Green Valley Farming Group, Watchman's Rice Cooperative Farming Group, Bu Hunger Strikers CIG Farming Group, Neighbours Common Initiative Group, Bu Young Farming Group among others³⁰. The loans obtained were used to increase output and provide education, clothing, health, food, shelter, and other basic needs for family members.

Furthermore, the cooperative engaged in infrastructural development. Its head office was constructed in the Bafren quarter in Bu village. A rice drying slab was also built to help farmers dry rice before hulling. The roads to rice fields and Wum town were constructed and upgraded respectively. The farm-to-market road was hardly used because of a very difficult topography (Ache 2018). In 1999, Mbengkas benefited from a project of road maintenance worth 200,000 FCFA. Mr. Towah Joshua in describing these activities said:

29 BMRCs Ltd Archives, An Employment Attestation Received by Ndang Ebenezer Fung as Manager of BMRCs Ltd, 7th April, 1998.

30 BMRCs Ltd Archives, Loan Payment Situation for Groups under the Paddy Rice Programme in Menchum Division, 2000/2001.

[...] during our period, the Wum-Bu-rice valley road was constructed at the cost of 800, 000 FCFA, which was in proper used. We inherited two machines that were given by WADA, one from England which later got bad and another one was later purchased from Japan called Sateke. There was a project for a transportation car but [...] (Towah 2018, n.p.).

A motorable road and a car to transport rice produced in Laimbwe land was a necessity but the car was never bought. Over 2 million from 1996 was also budgeted for the development of pipe-borne water. The cooperative also assisted in the construction of a laboratory workshop in the Bu Health Centre. This laboratory cost the government over 20, 600,000 FCFA³¹. It also initiated collaboration with other cooperatives such as those of Esimbi, Yemngeh, Esu, Aguli-Ebiate and Aghem. Through WADA it initiated national and international partnerships with organisations like FIDA, IDF and UNDP, microfinance companies, banks and ministries like that of Agriculture and Rural Development. In spite of this, the cooperatives faced several challenges.

Challenges

The Bu/Mbengkas cooperative faced a number of challenges. In 2002, the cooperative was the only primary industry operating in the Menchum Division out of the several that WADA had supported like Esimbi, Yemngeh, Esu, and Aguli-Ebiate³². The collapse of WADA in 1983 was a big blow to the survival of the cooperative because this rural development structure served as a key pillar of the cooperative. The Bu/Mbengkas cooperative began with two hulling mills thanks to WADA who also provided a visiting operator. It also assisted in the training of two operators and farmers on agricultural techniques, and construction of the head office and supported the digging of the road from Bu to the rice valley.

Another factor that led to the collapse of BMRCS Ltd was the leadership fuss in Bu in 1981 after the death of Fon Chu Mbonghekan (Kah 2008, 165). The death of Chu Mbonghekan in 1981 created a power vacuum because his successor, Bwai David Awah (1984-1994), was not welcomed by some Bu indigenes (Kai 2018, 108) neither was Emmanuel Bong Muam nor the father Andrew Ndo Muam. This chieftaincy crisis divided Bu people and affected the working and loyalty in the cooperative society. When Bwai David

³¹ Rice Processing Project BMRCS, 3-4.

³² Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 2.

Awah died in 1994, the other claimant to the throne Fon Bonghezee II (Bong Emmanuel Muam) was also not loved by a cross section of the population. This throne was also contested by his father, Ndo Andrew Muam on the basis of legitimacy. The situation was compounded when two development associations emerged; firstly Bu Cultural and Development Association (BUCADA) and then the Bu Village Development Council (BVDC) (Ewi 2007/2008, 36-45). These associations seemingly operated along the lines of the brewing leadership scuffle. The continuation of this leadership fuss split cooperative Exco members, workers, and farmers and by 2014 it had collapsed.

The administrative reorganisation of Cameroon into smaller units was to become a problem that affected the cooperative. The creation of new divisions and subdivisions in 1992 which went operational in 1993 saw Mbengkas come under the Funding subdivision of Boyo Division (Cheng 2003, 1). Bu remained part of the Wum Central Sub-Division of the Menchum Division (Kai 2018, 105). Mbengkas people began to intensify efforts to create their own cooperatives. They felt that the Bu people had dominated the cooperative with little budget to develop Mbengkas.

The domination, marginalisation, and arrogance in leadership and allocation of projects by the cooperative management also contributed to its collapse. Table 1 shows how for close to forty years of existence of the cooperative two persons (Wainjuh Alfred Kamsang Martin Ngeh) from Mbengkas occupied the post of chairman out of eleven chairmen, two were vice Presidents, one treasurer, and one adviser (Towah 2018). This clearly shows an imbalance in the leadership or administration of the cooperative from its creation to its collapse. Besides, in the allocation of projects, Bu was privileged over Mbengkas. For instance, the head office of the cooperative was constructed in Bu, and a rice drying slab, and a road from the cooperative to rice farms and Wum were constructed and upgraded (Ache 2018). It was in 1999 that Mbengkas benefited from a project of road maintenance with a budget of only 200,000 FCFA. Pipe-borne water worth 2 million FCFA, and a laboratory workshop costing over 20, 600,000 FCFA (with a substantial amount from the cooperative) were all constructed in Bu³³. All these among others made Mbengkas people feel cheated. Some of them boycotted the cooperative and took their rice to Obang in Bafut Subdivision to hull it.

Another challenge the cooperative faced was the lack of enough hulling machines and the constant breakdown of the few that were given by WADA. Engineers like John Taiti and Dobgima came for their repairs and this was costly to the cooperative (Towah 2018). The situation was compou-

³³ Rice Processing Project, BMRCSS, 3-4.

ned by the scarcity of spare parts and in relation to these challenges, Mr Ebenezer Ndong (2018), a former manager said that:

The highest problem was with farmers. When I borrowed money (18 million FCFA) to give as loan to buy a machine to install in Mbengkas [...] I took from the National Employment Fund (NEF), and I was imprisoned in a cell for a night. Few farmers paid and we bought a hulling mill at Mbengkas for 3.7 million FCFA with the money I borrowed, the money was also used to arrange the valley road from Mbengkas, I also repaid the hulling mill in Bu [...] (Ndong 2018, n.p.).

The manager of BMRC Ltd tried to handle the problem of the rice mill and a motorable road to Mbengkas. He reduced congestion in the cooperative and borrowed money from NEF for a machine in Mbengkas. But due to mismanagement, the machine could only last for long.

Furthermore, embezzlement, mismanagement, favouritism, corruption, bribery, and non-accountability caused the cooperative to face serious challenges which hindered it from attaining set objectives. This was one reason that led to the collapse of the cooperative. By 1996, more than 2 million FCFA had been illegally embezzled from the cooperative by some unscrupulous workers. According to a complaint written by Wango Stephen Fang (2018) (Chairman of the Board of Directors) to the state counsel in the Court of First Instance in Wum, he stated that:

[...] I Mr. Wango Stephen Fang, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Bu/Mbengkas Rice Cooperative Ltd pleads sir, that you use your high office to help my society recover the debts listed below. These debtors were given reminder letters and only up to April 30th as date line for the payment of their debts. But they have voluntarily refused to pay. I have also attached a copy of the reminder letters [...] ³⁴.

The complaint presented by the Chairman of the Board of Directors of BMRC Ltd to the state counsel in Wum had 89 persons who were debtors of the cooperative. This money was not recovered and the cooperative was in a budget deficit and collapsed. Similarly, in 2001 under the leadership of Ndong Johnson Ndong and Ndong Ebenezar as Manager, 119 persons were documented to owe the cooperative a total debt of 2,960,280 FCFA ³⁵.

³⁴ BMRC Ltd Archives, A Complaint Presented by the Chairman of the Board of Directors, BMRC Ltd, Wango Stephen Fang to the State Counsel of the Court of First Instance in Wum Central Sub-Division, 24th April, 1996.

³⁵ Report on the Evaluation Workshops, 5-7.

According to an audit of the Management-Accounting, Audit, and Consultative (MAAC) Group, about 35 members were owing and embezzled over 1, 232,070 FCFA between 31st December 2005 and 31st August 2008³⁶.

Visible signs of the irredeemable cooperative were from 2010 when Ngong Mercy (2010-2013) took over as Chairwoman and was succeeded by Muh Griffith Kang (2013-2014). The two chairpersons did not inherit a reasonable account (Akuh and Ndang 2018). From 2010 to 2014 therefore, they could not manage the cooperative, especially the hulling mill to meet the needs of farmers. The financial statement presented during the extra-ordinary meeting of 2010 indicated that the total income was 1,391,00 FCFA and after a deduction of debts owed UNDP, the balance on deposit was -57,000 FCFA. The unconvincing reason given was that the board had not met in three years. The situation did not change as the cooperative registered a further deficit of -474,200 FCFA in the 2011 financial report³⁷.

Conclusion

In this paper we have shown that President Ahmadou Ahidjo introduced reforms to revive Cameroon's agricultural sector through Five Years Development Plans. This led to the establishment of several supporting structures across the country to have a dream realised. It was on this basis that WADA was created which among other things was to modernise agriculture in Menchum and beyond.

The eventual establishment of the BMRCS Ltd in 1975 was thanks to the outreach activities of WADA. Its main aim was to transform in different ways the economy of the area. There was enthusiasm at the beginning but in later years the cooperative became a failure. Several projects were carried out but mostly in Bu with little done in Mbengkas. Mismanagement, exclusion, carelessness, and negligence led to animosity, slander, bitterness, intransigence, and thus the collapse of the lofty initiative in 2014. Considering the importance of the rice economy on the livelihood of the Laimbwe people, other institutions succeeded the BMRCS Ltd. These were PADFA (2015 – 2018) and then ASPPA but a laudable initiative had collapsed with attendant consequences. Besides, these institutions were not as inclusive and

³⁶ BMRCS Ltd Archives, MAAC Group, Audit Report to the Members of Cooperative Society, Reg. No. NW/29/00/3076 of 27/01/200, P.O. Box 978 Bamenda N.W.P. Republic of Cameroon, 31st August, 2008.

³⁷ BMRCS Ltd Archives, Financial Report, 24th June, 2011.

grassroots in mobilisation as the BMRCS Ltd. Lessons need to be learned from this failure for success in the future.

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ABSTRACT

This work examines the Bu/Mbengkas Rice Cooperative Society Limited (BMRCs Ltd) in livelihood sustainability of Bu and Mbengkas, Laimbwe-speaking people of the Menchum and Boyo Divisions of the Northwest Region of Cameroon respectively. We have employed mainly the qualitative research method in data collection and analyses. Published papers, theses, minutes of meetings, and archival material including reports, speeches, and letters have also been gleaned and analysed. Some interviews were conducted with actors and participants. The need to revive Cameroon's economy led President Ahmadou Ahidjo of Cameroon in the 1960s and 1970s to introduce agricultural reforms through the Five Years Development Plans and the

“Green Revolution.” Through this, Laimbwe benefited from the establishment of a rice cooperative in the 1970s through the agency of the Wum Area Development Authority (WADA). The cooperative society led to socio-economic changes especially in Bu but not Mbengkas. A lot more would have been achieved but for mismanagement, greed, arrogance, domination, exclusion, and marginalisation. The result was the collapse of a laudable initiative in 2014.

KEYWORDS

Cooperative. Ethnic Group. Laimbwe. Economy. Society. Cameroon.

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