



1.6 From demonstration plot to agribusiness and rural tourism, Cameroon

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Introduction

The Twantoh Mixed Farmer Common Initiative Group (MIFACIG) has grown from an agroforestry demonstration plot to an integrated self-sustaining agricultural business and rural tourism centre in the Boyo Division of the Northwest Province of Cameroon. The group now has 22 satellite branches, which maintain a strong network. This allows them to respond together to the rising demand for tree seedlings. This demand reaches 20,000 in some years, worth about 25 million FCFA (US\$50,000). From a focus on agroforestry in the early 1990s, the producer group has diversified its activities to include animal rearing, beekeeping, horticulture, organic gardening and agricultural tourism. With similar support, this model could surely be replicated by other enterprising producer groups around the world.

Origin of the producer group

The Twantoh Mixed Farmer Common Initiative Group was created in 1993 by Kuh Emmanuel Lo-ah, then an agriculture technician. It was founded as a response to the low yields that were the result of the poor soil fertility that is characteristic of Boyo Division. As a young graduate with no job, Lo-ah was determined to start a private vegetable garden and establish a tree nursery with species that could improve soil fertility. He knew that these issues were not just his own, but concerned the entire community, and he began to raise awareness and mobilize community members who had similar problems and goals. The process was facilitated by a 1992 law that enabled the creation of common initiative groups to support development in the country. These efforts led to the creation of the MIFACIG producer organization, which was registered with 15 members in 1993.



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Evolution of activities

MIFACIG started with an organic vegetable garden and a tree nursery, and gradually integrated other activities such as honey production and livestock farming. With improvements in the members' technical abilities in agriculture and agroforestry, and with increasing demand from other farming communities and development NGOs, the group became a training hub for agroforestry. By 2004, it received financial assistance from the U.S. Peace Corps Volunteer Program to support the completion of a training and meeting hall that the group had started to build with its own money.

By that time, it had grown into a strong farmer organization and was the centrepiece of most rural development projects in Boyo Division. Many research and development organizations entered into partnership with MIFACIG in order to reach more farmers in the community or to use its facilities. These organizations would then reserve part of their budgets for MIFACIG to carry out training and awareness-raising. MIFACIG was often a partner in project proposals, in many cases to meet donor requests for participatory approaches.

Partnering with development projects had clear potential advantages, but also brought with it a major challenge: the revenue generated by such activities could not sustain the members and the group. Members' expectations of direct financial benefits could not be met through such partnerships. The group also had to pay the salaries of secretaries and other technical staff, who were hired from time to time to complement in-house expertise. Furthermore, partnership with development projects took some group members away from their farming activities, especially the most enlightened members, who were serving as field guides and interpreters for many development projects, visitors and researchers.

These frustrations led to a strong desire to do things differently. In response, MIFACIG members diversified their activities and sources of income, and in 2004 embarked on a new approach to share the knowledge and experience they had gained over the years. The organization started providing training to other producer groups through consultancy services; they also began to sell tree seedlings. The group also decided to maintain its partnerships with international development initiatives, especially joint projects, where they made key contributions to awareness-raising, training and knowledge sharing. This approach transformed MIFACIG from a farmer group into an integrated agroforestry resource and training centre. The centre now has a conference hall, lodging facilities and canteen; tree nursery; animal production unit and piggery; organic garden, compost site and medicinal plant garden; soil fertility project, multi-storey home-garden and beekeeping demonstration plots; and a food processing unit with dryers and honey treatment equipment.



Key success factors

Donor and NGO support and trust

NGOs have contributed enormously to building the capacity of members through training in group dynamics and leadership, agroforestry and tree propagation, enterprise development, financial management, communication and marketing techniques (Foundjem-Tita et al. 2012). For example, a partnership with the World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF) that began in 1998 led to training in tree propagation techniques, enabling the group to further disseminate agroforestry technologies. This led to the creation of 11 nurseries in Boyo Division in 1998–2004 and later in Menchum Division, with a total of 22 by 2014. MIFACIG uses training modules on group dynamics, enterprise development and marketing to empower its network of satellite nurseries and farmer groups. Furthermore, group members now run demonstration plots on agroforestry, beekeeping and medicinal plants as well as a multipurpose tree nursery and an integrated farm and training centre. This work has helped build trust among the group, donors and development NGOs.

Although the group generates substantial income from the sales of crops, trees and other products, donor support has been crucial. Since 2008 MIFACIG and its satellite nursery groups, as well as non-member farmers, have benefited from external support, which has contributed to the group's growth and success.

Generating funding

Income generated from the sale of trees and diversified activities has enabled the centre to improve its infrastructure and training facilities, and helped it to survive with minimal donor support. In order to generate funding, the group helped its satellite nurseries to market the plants they produced by making the resource centre a point of contact for buyers. Orders received at the centre were sent to the satellite nurseries, who fulfilled the demands. This approach led to a significant improvement in the livelihoods of group members.



Adequate infrastructure

Another important element of success in the development of the resource centre has been its extensive infrastructure, which was achieved through financial and material support. This was generated by the sale of agroforestry planting materials and products, services delivered to other actors, and donor support.

The new buildings and infrastructure improved the training facilities, and increased the skills of farmer groups who request services from MIFACIG.

Strong institutions and committed members

Membership is open to anyone in the community who respects the group's bylaws and internal regulations. These bylaws specify that members should be of good morals, must carry out agroforestry activities, must regularly attend meetings, and must pay their

registration and annual dues. The group's leaders testify that strict respect for these rules in the selection of committed members is one of the reasons for its success.

A well organized structure and dedicated leadership

One of the major success factors has been a dedicated leadership capable of defining and implementing the vision and mission of the group. MIFACIG is managed by a seven-member bureau that is elected by a general assembly of 39 members. Bureau members are all farmers with a strong commitment and dedication to success. Group members acknowledge the important role of their leader for his ability to lobby, network and win the trust of other stakeholders who are ready to partner with the group. The qualities of the group leader are highlighted by the requests made for their president to preside over other farmer organizations, including the Ijim Trees Farmers Union (of which MIFACIG is a member) and the national platform of farmers' organizations.

Identification of a niche market

The demand for improved planting material continues to rise, with increasing calls to plant more trees to mitigate the effects of climate change. Here, the producer group has been able to carve out a niche market. Buyers include smallholders as well as leader farmers, but the majority of sales are for large contracts made by city councils and elected officials. The latter two groups rely on MIFACIG because of its reputation for timely service and reliable planting materials in large quantities. Politicians often buy plants from the group to distribute to farmers during political campaigns. These planting materials are used to add value to arable and inhabited land. By 2013, the MIFACIG Resource Centre had produced and sold about 60,000 tree seedlings.



Provision of services to other social groups

In addition to partnering and working with several national and international organizations and institutions, MIFACIG has built strong working relationship with other social groups. These groups use MIFACIG's facilities to host events and lodge guests, for recreation and for practical learning and demonstrations on sustainable agriculture and agroforestry practices. Income generated from hiring out these facilities and services is an important source of revenue for MIFACIG, and supports its sustainability.

Social and environmental impact

The number of members grew from seven in 1992 to 42 in 2013. MIFACIG currently has 41 members: 22 men and 19 women. It considers gender in the implementation of its activities, and women make up 48% of all trainees; members range in age from 20 to 60, meaning that youth also take part. In addition to working with farmers, MIFACIG also carries out awareness-raising with schools on agroforestry and environmental protection.

For example, the promotion of organic gardening in schools, sponsored by the New England Biolabs Foundation, led to 18 schools and 600 pupils benefiting from the establishment of demonstration gardens and lessons in agroforestry and beekeeping.

At the end of one of the gardening projects in 1998, carried out in partnership with the *Cercle International pour la Promotion de la Création* (CIPCRE), there were visible results in terms of improved gardening techniques. Household members saw the need to learn and adopt these innovations, which resulted in an increase in the availability of fresh vegetables all year round.

The Food for Progress project that was run in partnership with ICRAF and the United States Department of Agriculture led to the growth and development of satellite nursery groups. The number of satellite nurseries grew steadily as ever more communities saw the benefits of joining the initiative. By 2003, MIFACIG was managing about 10 satellite nurseries; by 2008 the number had risen to 20; they are now found up to 65 km from the resource centre. Today, the group monitors and manages the field activities of 22 satellite nursery groups involving more than 3,000 farmers in 30 communities. MIFACIG continues to add farmers to its network and engage in training and capacity building for a range of activities. These efforts have improved farmers' livelihoods and promoted the centre's work in agroforestry education.

Table 1. Number of beneficiaries trained at the MIFACIG resource centre, 2005–13

Activities	2005–07	2008–10	2011–13	Total
kola nut market opportunities, post-harvest/marketing techniques	752	255	150	1,157
Agroforestry/poverty alleviation/environmental protection	54 (all women)	60 (all women)	75 (all women)	189
Multipurpose/improved tree integration into coffee farms	782	825	214	1,821
Sustainable development	35 (all youths)	56 (all youths)	28 (all youths)	119
Tree domestication and planting	27 (all youths)	35 (all youths)	55 (all youths)	117
Total	1,650	1,231	522	3,403

Source: MIFACIG 2014

Challenges

Even though MIFACIG generates funding from donor support and its own business efforts, the group still encounters financial difficulties. In fact, income from the nursery, piggery, apiary and garden is not enough to provide free training to farmers and to adequately compensate the staff. Consequently, MIFACIG encounters material constraints in

providing proper training, such as a shortage of beehives and apiary equipment, no piped water in the nursery, no projector and few other communication tools. There is also a need for a service van to transport people and materials, and transportation difficulties are further hampered by poor roads.

There are specific difficulties connected to the lack of adequate technologies to improve honey production and processing, and inefficient marketing strategies. Beekeepers have not been able to succeed, due to the continuing absence of a strong marketing network.

A shortage of competent staff has been a major problem since inception. Although MIFACIG staff have benefited from training courses from ICRAF and other partners since 1998, there is still a need for technical support and capacity building in management and accounting techniques. This lack of capacity impedes the coordination and timely preparation of reports, and means that some activities are difficult to implement because of the low educational level of some members. However, MIFACIG is now entering a new era in which “sharing knowledge that serves life” could be its new motto, based on its achievements and experience.

Conclusion and recommendations

The achievements of this producer organization have not depended solely on money — commitment, honesty and vision are guiding principles in its success. Farmers tend to capitalize on the financial benefits of community projects that rely on external inputs. The case of MIFACIG shows that generating funds through group activities can help realize a vision. However, the guaranteed multiplier effect demonstrated by this producer organization/resource centre, which produces services as well as goods, is a positive example for other producer groups to emulate. The example of MIFACIG also shows that despite the capacity to generate income, external support from donors, NGOs and governments is still necessary to meet the higher objectives of such a group.

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