
Tackling the Down Side: Social Capital, Women's Empowerment and Micro-Finance in Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

Micro-finance programmes are currently dominated by the 'financial self-sustainability paradigm' where women's participation in groups is promoted as a key means of increasing financial sustainability while at the same time assumed to automatically empower them. This article examines the experience of seven micro-finance programmes in Cameroon. The evidence indicates that micro-finance programmes which build social capital can indeed make a significant contribution to women's empowerment. However, serious questions need to be asked about what sorts of norms, networks and associations are to be promoted, in whose interests, and how they can best contribute to empowerment, particularly for the poorest women. Where the complexities of power relations and inequality are ignored, reliance on social capital as a mechanism for reducing programme costs may undermine programme aims not only of empowerment but also of financial sustainability and poverty targeting.

INTRODUCTION

Micro-finance programmes are currently promoted by multilateral and bilateral donor agencies as a means of inserting poverty alleviation and empowerment objectives into the dominant development objective of market-led growth. Current policy in many donor agencies, particularly members of CGAP,¹ and much of the official literature from the Micro-credit Summit is

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1. Consultative Group to Assist the Poorest (CGAP) is a major international collaborative initiative arising from the 1993 International Conference on Actions to Reduce Global Hunger and was formally constituted in 1995. The nine founding members are Canada, France, the Netherlands, the United States, the African Development Bank, the Asian

dominated by the 'financial self-sustainability paradigm'. Within this paradigm women's participation in groups is promoted as a key means of increasing financial sustainability and poverty targeting through drawing on 'social capital', while at the same time being assumed to empower women through automatically strengthening this social capital. However, the primary rationale of financial sustainability means there is little support for actively developing 'social capital', either in terms of collective economic activity to increase incomes or organization to enable women to challenge gender subordination (Mayoux, 1998a).

This optimism about the intrinsic simultaneous benefits of social capital to both micro-finance programmes and women themselves ignores questions raised about networks and collective action in current critical literature on social capital as well as earlier critiques of participatory development. Recent research has questioned the degree to which reliance on social capital necessarily enhances financial sustainability and poverty targeting.² Importantly, there are gender dimensions to the debate which need further clarification. Recent research in Bangladesh and elsewhere has questioned any automatic benefits of micro-finance for women and also pointed to the potentially negative impact of the ways in which current policies for financial sustainability are being implemented.³

It is clear that the interrelationships between social capital, empowerment and sustainability are extremely complex. As a preliminary to more comprehensive comparative discussion, this article examines the experience of seven micro-finance programmes in Cameroon. These programmes all place considerable reliance on client networks and voluntary input for loan disbursement and recovery, but follow different models of micro-finance and have different approaches to gender policy. The evidence indicates that micro-finance programmes which build social capital can indeed make a significant contribution to women's empowerment. However, serious questions need to be asked about what sorts of norms, networks and associations are to be

Development Bank, the International Fund for Agricultural Development, the United Nations Development Programme/United Nations Capital Development Fund and the World Bank, later followed by Australia, Finland, Norway, Sweden, ILO, UNIFEM, the UK and Inter-American Development Bank. Approximately US \$200 million (including existing budget commitments) was pledged to Micro-Finance programmes for the poorest groups in low income countries, particularly women (World Bank, 1996). Actual amounts disbursed by individual CGAP members were, however, considerably higher and budgets have increased in recent years.

2. For an overview of discussions of social capital, financial sustainability and poverty targeting see van Bastelaer (nd). See also, for example, Reinke (1996, 1998) for discussion in relation to the Small Enterprise Foundation in South Africa. Although the calculations on which his study are based were erroneous for SEF (see Simanowitz, 1999) the general points raised remain valid.
3. See in particular Goetz and Sengupta (1996); Rahman (1999) and references in Mayoux (1998a, 1999).

promoted, in whose interests, and how they can best contribute to empowerment, particularly for the poorest women.

SOCIAL CAPITAL, SUSTAINABILITY AND EMPOWERMENT: ASSUMPTIONS IN THE FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY PARADIGM

The financial self-sustainability paradigm⁴ currently dominating micro-finance debates has been a reaction to what were seen as unprofessional and charitable approaches to savings and credit delivery in government and NGO poverty-targeted income-generation programmes. Many of these had been characterized by inefficiency, low repayment levels, limited coverage and poverty reach, and corruption. The paradigm's ambitious vision is of large, expanding and financially self-sustainable programmes making access to micro-finance services available to large numbers of poor people as a 'human right' (RESULTS, 1997). The most detailed articulation of the paradigm is given in Otero and Rhyne (1994), echoed in micro-finance manuals, consultancy reports and funding guidelines by CGAP and its member donor agencies. From this literature it is possible to identify a number of distinguishing elements:

- group-based savings and credit delivery;
- rapid expansion and large-scale delivery to benefit from economies of scale and increase impact on poverty;
- high 'market' interest rates to cover costs of delivery including costs of professional banking and accounting expertise;
- minimalist focus on micro-finance and reduction in support services and/or separation of micro-finance from other activities in terms of both accounting and staffing.

Alongside the emphasis on financial sustainability, accumulating evidence of women's higher repayment rates has enabled gender lobbies within agencies like USAID and the World Bank to argue that micro-finance targeting women is a viable means of marrying gender, poverty and efficiency concerns. Methodologies for increasing women's access to micro-finance are prominent throughout the financial sustainability literature, including the initial

4. A paradigm is understood here as a distinct discourse arising from particular value and political premises which, despite internal inconsistencies in practice, is internally logically consistent in relating values to aims and policies. As I have discussed in detail elsewhere in relation to micro-finance, it is possible to identify three distinct paradigms, the other two being a 'poverty alleviation' paradigm and a 'feminist empowerment paradigm', each of which have different understandings of the role of micro-finance, women's empowerment and sustainability (Mayoux, 1998a). The financial self-sustainability paradigm described here includes but extends the description of solidarity group lending described by Reinke (1998) and Rogaly (1996).

formulation in Otero and Rhyne. There has recently been a series of donor gender manuals and guidelines (for example, Binns, 1998; UNIFEM, 1993, 1995). These have emphasized the importance of techniques for facilitating women's access, in particular the location of lending outlets, appropriate collateral requirements and offering particular products demanded by women like savings, very small loans and more recently insurance and pensions.

Group-based programmes have been advocated since at least the mid-1990s as a means of reducing the costs of micro-finance delivery to poor clients.⁵ With the recent interest in debates about social capital in the World Bank and elsewhere, earlier debates about group-based delivery have come to be formulated in terms of social capital.⁶ The existence of social capital in the form of indigenous networks and norms of association is seen as substituting for financial collateral in the selection of loan beneficiaries and loan disbursement and recovery. It is also seen as enabling the targeting of poor women in view of their limited access to resources (and also, often implicitly, their inherently co-operative nature). This decreases both costs and risk, thereby enabling rapid expansion for large-scale poverty-targeted delivery. These prescriptions are informed by the experience of large-scale micro-finance provision by programmes like Grameen Bank in Bangladesh. The paradigm does not, however, confine itself to any one particular programme model and donors promoting the paradigm are also interested in self-managed programmes, including Village Banks, savings and credit co-operatives and federations of self-help groups.

The underlying assumption is that the material benefit which clients receive in terms of access to credit and savings is an acceptable exchange for material contribution in the form of interest rates and social capital.⁷ Group-based micro-finance is seen as having particularly significant benefits for women, contributing not only to poverty alleviation, but also to women's empowerment through a series of interlinked and mutually reinforcing 'virtuous spirals' (Mayoux, 1998a). Firstly savings and credit provision in itself is assumed to contribute to a process of individual economic empowerment through enabling women to decide about savings and credit use. It is assumed that women will invest in their own economic activity, either agricultural production or micro-enterprise, thus increasing incomes

5. For example, building on earlier work by Stiglitz (1990), Otero and Rhyne write (1994: 16) 'Group formation is often employed by micro-enterprise programmes particularly for the poorest clientele. The group plays a role in reducing the cost of gathering information about the borrower, but its more important role is in repayments through shared liability for default. Lenders can shift some of the loan-processing and loan-approval tasks onto the group because the groups have better access to information on the character and creditworthiness of potential borrowers'.

6. For a good overview of debates in micro-finance see van Bastelaer (nd).

7. According to Otero and Rhyne (1994: 16): 'When very poor clients care more about access to credit than the terms on which it is offered, groups can be used without significantly impairing demand'.

which they themselves will be able to control. Secondly, women's economic empowerment is then assumed to lead to increased well-being for themselves and their families. Thirdly this economic empowerment is further seen as enabling women to renegotiate changes in gender relations leading to social and political empowerment. At all these levels, group-based programmes are assumed to build 'social capital' through developing and strengthening women's economic and social networks.⁸ This building of 'social capital' is then assumed to further increase the contribution of savings and credit provision to women's empowerment through enhancing their ability to increase incomes, negotiate change in the household and engage in collective social and political activity (see Sebstad et al., 1995: 17).

Social capital is therefore seen as simultaneously contributing to financial sustainability, poverty targeting and women's empowerment. The assumption underlying the paradigm is that social capital is inherently positive and beneficial and can be used by programmes without external intervention to build or increase it. This optimism is based on a very narrow understanding of the concept of social capital focusing on horizontal norms, networks and associations assumed to generate trust and information which can be used by micro-finance programmes. This preoccupation ignores other dimensions and levels of social capital identified even by the World Bank: rules and norms, vertical linkages and the macro-level environment.⁹ In particular it ignores recent debates about the potential 'down side' of social capital.¹⁰ The World Bank itself outlines three major dimensions (World Bank social capital web site, 2000): (1) social networks which provide people with access to markets through reputation and repeated transactions can exclude new entrants (citing Collier, 1998); (2) community pressure may be harmful to individuals as 'traditions can stifle individual growth and creativity and members who do not comply with norms and their families can be ridiculed or ousted from the community'; (3) 'communities with a lot of social capital, particularly if organised along ethnic or religious lines, can be harmful to each other and to society' as a whole.

Importantly, the gender dimensions of these critiques have hitherto been largely ignored, even in much of the critical literature. In the World Bank's

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8. For example, contribution to social capital has been included in criteria for programme evaluation in recent USAID-sponsored impact studies. According to Sebstad et al. (1995: 16): 'An important aspect and development at the community level involves the building of social capital, whereby members of the community mutually encourage each other ... Social capital links individuals, enterprises and households to each other through two related channels: information and reputation'.
 9. Social capital refers to the institutions, relationships and norms that shape the quality and quantity of a society's social interactions (see World Bank social capital web site). For an overview of the development of the concept within the World Bank see Fox (1997).
 10. For overviews and critique of original uses of the concept by Coleman and Putnam on which the World Bank definitions are based see, for example, Evans (1996); Foley and Edwards (1999); Harriss and de Renzio (1997); Portes and Landolt (1996).

section on social capital and gender the emphasis is on women's contribution to social capital, differences between men's and women's networks, and the negative implications for social capital of gender inequality. There is no discussion of how gender inequality structures the ways in which different types of social capital can operate to the disbenefit of women. These omissions have serious implications for gender outcomes of policies to 'use social capital' and even those to 'strengthen social capital'.

As summarized in Box 1 (based largely on van Bastelaer's discussion) there is a need for a more sophisticated model of different forms and dimensions of social capital, drawing on the wider debates. In addition, as discussed in more detail below, there is a need for much more serious consideration of the ways in which gender inequalities in resources, power and rights structure the nature of the rules, norms and forms of association between women and between women and men. This is crucial to ensuring that group-based micro-finance realizes its potential contribution to women's empowerment. This last involves a much more critical assessment not only of women's horizontal networks, but also of vertical linkages between women, potential constraints posed by men's social capital and macro-level institutions. It also requires more critical analysis of the underlying assumptions about gender subordination embedded in the rules and norms governing associations and relationships at all levels. These questions are crucial to the ways in which social capital affects financial sustainability and poverty targeting in the increasing numbers of programmes aimed at women.

WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT, MICRO-FINANCE AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CAMEROON

In Cameroon, as elsewhere, there has recently been considerable interest in micro-finance as a tool for poverty alleviation. There has also been recent interest in women's access to micro-finance sources as part of a general concern with gender issues amongst local NGOs in some parts of Cameroon as well as donor agencies and international NGOs. Women's participation in micro-finance programmes was estimated at only about 0.3–0.6 per cent of the female population in 1996 (Fournier, 1997). In Cameroon as elsewhere a number of programmes are increasingly targeting women, or at least attempting to reach more women.

Partly prompted by the increasing interest in micro-finance by major donors there have been a number of reviews of appropriate micro-finance models which have stressed the benefits of mutualist models like credit co-operatives and village banks, notably Fournier (1997) and Vandenbroucke (1997). The Cameroon context, like much of West Africa, would seem particularly favourable to mutualist models because of the wide range of groups and associations to which many women as well as men belong (see

BOX 1: SOCIAL CAPITAL — FRAMEWORK AND GENDER DIMENSIONS OF THE DOWN SIDE

Social Capital: A Differentiated Framework

Forms of social capital

- **rules and norms** which facilitate formation and continuance of associations and relationships
- **actual associations and relationships** between people and groups of people

Dimensions of social capital

- horizontal linkages: involving people of like status and interests
- vertical linkages: linking people of unequal status and complementary interests
- macro-level linkages: rules, norms and associations at the macro level which structure macro-level horizontal and vertical linkages

Social Capital and Micro-Finance: Gender Dimensions of the Down Side

Empowerment

Assumption: group-based programmes which use social capital lead to economic, social and political empowerment because they promote collective activity

Critical gender questions:

- what forms do women's associations and networks take? how far and in what ways can they form the basis for empowerment?
- what is the nature of horizontal and vertical relationships between women and men within households and kin groups?
- how far and in what ways does men's social capital serve to reinforce gender subordination?
- how far and in what ways do macro-level economic, legal, social and political institutions constrain women's ability to negotiate change at the local level?
- what are the underlying assumptions about gender relations which may serve to reinforce gender subordination at all these levels?

Female and poverty targeting

Assumption: social capital is particularly important in female targeting, particularly for poor women, because this is one of the few resources which poor women have

Critical gender questions:

- how far do horizontal linkages between particular groups of women exclude outsiders, particularly the poorest and most disadvantaged women?
- how far are vertical linkages between women harmful to or exploitative of the poorest and most disadvantaged women?

Financial sustainability

Assumption: social capital will operate within micro-finance groups to ensure loan repayment and reduce costs of delivery

Critical questions:

- what are the gendered assumptions underlying the assertion that women will be able to freely contribute time and resources to programmes?
- how far can women's social capital be used as a resource by programmes without depleting it?

Box 2). In particular, since the 1950s rotating savings and credit activities (ROSCAs), called 'tontine' in francophone areas and 'njangi' in anglophone Cameroon,¹¹ have played an increasing role in mobilizing savings at village level with the development of a cash economy. Even in the areas like South West Province where traditional social ties have been broken by migration, ethnic cohesion is maintained within Church-based networks called 'family meetings' which again have women's wings.

What follows focuses on seven group-based programmes¹² which follow different models of micro-finance in terms of loan and savings methodologies but all of which place considerable reliance on 'indigenous social capital' for loan delivery and recovery and administration of loans.

- **CGT** (Cameroon Gatsby Trust): a women-targeted programme started in 1994 delivering loans to women's tontine groups. By 1998 it reached 536 groups, around 4000 women.
- **CIPCRE** (Cercle International pour la Promotion de la Creation): a Christian environmental NGO giving CGT loans to women's, mixed and men's groups within its peasant associations in North West Province.
- **Mbonweh** (Mbonweh Women's Development Association): a self-managed model started in 1987 mobilizing internal funds and using loans from CGT for on-lending to individual women in family meetings. By 1998 there were around 1000 women members in twenty-two groups.
- **MC2 Banks** (Mutuelle Communautaire de Croissance): Village Banking network started in 1992. By 1998 there were twenty-two banks with 11,995 members, of whom 26 per cent were women.
- **CAMCCUL** (Cameroon Co-operative Credit Union League): started in 1963. By 1998 it had over 296 Credit Unions reaching 102,771 members, of whom 33 per cent were women.
- **BERDSO** (Benevolent Community Development Education and Rural Development Society): an NGO started in 1990 delivering loans to women's groups, which has recently adopted a Grameen model. In

11. For discussions of women's ROSCAs in Cameroon see van den Brink and Chavas (1997), Niger-Thomas (1995) and Rowlands (1995), and for discussions of men's tontines see Baham (1995), Delancey (1977, 1978), and Tchente and Guileerme-Dieumegarde (1991).
12. Discussion is based on a six-week consultancy with CGT and partner organizations in June–October 1998. The author facilitated thirteen focus group meetings in the four Provinces, each attended by about thirty to fifty women from different groups, but split into small subgroups for discussion of more sensitive and controversial issues. Private interviews were then conducted with individual borrowers, staff and non-members in the local markets. This material was supplemented by secondary source material. For further details of all the programmes discussed, see Mayoux (1998b); case studies of CGT, CIPCRE and MC2 can be found in Mayoux (2000), and of Mbonweh in Mayoux (2001, forthcoming).

BOX 2: FORMS OF 'INDIGENOUS SOCIAL CAPITAL'

Tontine/Njangi

Work Tontines/Njangi: these are relatively stable groups which have existed since pre-colonial times. The same core of women may work together in a named group for decades with other women entering or leaving from time to time. These work tontines may either work for cash and/or in rotation on each others' land and/or on the land of others, depending on the level of land access and needs of the particular women concerned.

Money Tontines/Njangi (ROSCAs): these are often started within work tontines or may be set up separately, for instance between women in markets. These are of many different types and generally involve women of similar economic status able to make similar levels of contribution. Better-off women often belong to a number of different ROSCAs. Funds are often divided into three levels:

- **rotating funds:** where members contribute regular amounts with each member taking turns to receive the contribution of the whole group, thus getting access to a lump sum from a series of small contributions. A typical village tontine for slightly better-off women may have about twelve members and fix its monthly contribution at about CFA 1000. On this basis each member can expect to receive CFA 12,000 per year. This is significant in relation to the level of disposable income in the village. Other smaller ones found in North West Province had about fifteen members each contributing CFA 200 twice a month. In some groups cash funds are also supplemented by funds in kind, such as kitchen equipment and other household goods.
- **savings and loan fund:** members may also contribute more than this regular amount into a savings fund which is then loaned out to others at interest, often 20–25 per cent. Savers may withdraw savings with notice, often receiving interest.
- **trouble fund:** a portion of the savings are often reserved in a fund which members may access for serious health problems or funerals. Sometimes these funds are interest free.

Family Meetings: These family meetings may comprise over 100 members and are at two levels:

- **the 'main meeting'** comprises both women and men and the group is recognized by the administration for tax collection. Officers are appointed by the group and regulations are set up regarding meeting attendance, contributions, birth and death assistance celebrations, revolving loans, choirs, dancing, savings etc.
- **a women's wing** subordinate to the main meeting but where women raise their own capital for social and economic undertakings. Some of these meetings have lasted for twenty to thirty years, coming together to raise funds for self-help.

Source: author's field notes

1998 it had 5000 members in South West Province, of whom 90 per cent are women.

- **FIMAC** (Financement D'Investissements de Micro-realizations Agricoles et Communautaires): a joint World Bank and Japanese funded credit programme started in 1992–93 delivering loans to registered Common Interest Groups. Loan decisions to groups are taken by World Bank staff but internal decisions by the group. By 1998 it had financed 540 groups of men and women with around 30 per cent of loans to women.

All have the stated aim of poverty alleviation for women and the term 'empowerment' is also prominent in promotional literature. However, CIPCRE and CAMCCUL were the only organizations with a gender policy. Mbonweh had an all-female and largely voluntary staff, and an explicit commitment to empowerment. BERDSCO had a programme for gender awareness. In CGT and MC2 the possibilities of a gender strategy were only beginning to be discussed at the time of the fieldwork in 1998, although it is understood that a number of significant changes have now taken place.¹³

The discussion focuses on examining the interrelationships between micro-finance, social capital and three key indicators of empowerment based on the expressed aims of the women interviewed:¹⁴ (1) increasing incomes from their own economic activity; (2) control over income;¹⁵ and (3) development of collective economic and social activities. The discussion is inevitably tentative and raises more questions than it answers. There has been no systematic quantitative impact assessment of any of the programmes. As discussed below, the four provinces covered (South West Province, North West Province, West Province and Littoral) are economically and ethnically diverse, with significant differences in women's position and levels of social cohesion and social control. It is nevertheless clear that current complacency is misplaced regarding the inevitable benefits to women of micro-finance programmes which use social capital primarily as a means of cutting costs.

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13. Full details are not available, but the MC2 network has developed a gender policy with the help of a Belgian NGO and CGT is now basing its model more closely on that of Mbonweh.
 14. Definitions of empowerment are notoriously contentious and these indicators inevitably represent only very selective dimensions of a complex process. For general overviews of debates see Kabeer (1999) and Rowlands (1997), and in relation to micro-finance see Mayoux (1998c). The indicators used here are based on focus group discussions and discussions with individual women about their expectations of micro-finance.
 15. In order to avoid criticism of 'Western feminist bias' towards economic individualism and autonomy, discussions were always preceded by a description of the situation from Bangladesh and the author's own fieldwork in India where women may choose to give loans to men and/or prefer to contribute income to a joint household income pool. In most cases this situation was seen by the women as an impossibility for them.

Increased Income¹⁶

The prime aim of most women was to increase the income from their own economic activities. Women in Cameroon have traditionally been involved in trade and business and some have become quite wealthy. Women have also always played a key role in production and marketing of food crops and are entitled to sell any crop surplus to earn cash for their families (Goheen, 1996; Gommans and van Alphen, 1991). In Northern Littoral, West and North-West Province, women's role in production has increased as a result of male migration to the plantations in Southern Littoral Province, leaving their wives to perform tasks previously done by men (Gommans and van Alphen, 1991). In Southern Littoral, and particularly Southern South-West Province, migrant women became dependent on male wages or engaged in trade as plantations took over land without offering much employment to women. However, even here with the increased male unemployment many women who previously depended on male formal sector earnings are now the main breadwinners. In the 1990s the combined effects of structural adjustment, increasing pressure on land, male unemployment and the rising costs of living in all areas pushed more women (and men) into the increasingly competitive informal sector of food marketing, petty trade and micro-enterprise.

Credit from the micro-finance programmes undoubtedly added a much-needed new source of investment funds to existing savings and loans through ROSCAs and other informal sources. Although some tontines enabled women to accumulate sums of over CFA 20,000 and had sophisticated arrangements for emergency 'trouble funds', women's ROSCAs were generally smaller than men's tontines and often involved quite small amounts of money. Importantly, payouts are by rotation and not necessarily at the best time for either agricultural production or other economic activity, and interest rates on borrowed funds were often very high (60 per cent per annum on the savings and loan fund in some cases).

Most of the programmes targeted only women involved in, or intending to set up, economic activities. Women interviewed in focus group discussions had taken loans for a variety of business activities including particularly:

16. Some wages and prices at the time of the consultancy may serve as useful points of comparison, although they were highly variable between regions:

Male agricultural wages for clearing land: CFA 1500 per day (CFA 40,000 per ha). Payment of boy shop assistant: CFA 10,000 per month (Mbanga). Land rent: CFA 50,000 to CFA 120,000 per ha per year depending on quality and location (Mbanga). Land purchase: CFA 50,000 for two poles of land away from urban area (Buea). Household expenditure: estimated monthly expenditure for family of two adults and five children with land: CFA 5000 for soap, oil, meat, health (Buea). Market fees: CFA 100 per day municipal ticket (Nkongsamba). Education per term: college CFA 45,000–50,000, day school CFA 8000, nursery CFA 10,000 (Buea).

- subsistence farming and/or sale of food crops and vegetables;
- poultry farming, piggery, goats, rabbits;
- brewing corn beer;
- provision stores, petty retail trading;
- knitting and tailoring;
- trade in clothes, maternity wear, dresses, blouses and second-hand clothing.

Other less common activities included sale of building materials, sub-contracting palm oil from Cameroon Development Corporation, taxi business and patent medical stores. Although (as discussed below) not all the loan had been used for productive purposes, the loan had contributed directly or indirectly towards providing resources for these activities.

Some of the women were very experienced traders and entrepreneurs. Some were initially better-off and/or had relatively high levels of education and had set up viable new enterprises or added to existing viable businesses as in the case of Mme Anna in Box 3. Some have shown considerable ingenuity in developing enterprises, as in the case of one woman tailor who had built up a thriving business producing women's underwear and who now employed many other women in her village. Some of the women, such as Mrs Juliana and Mrs Agnes, come from very violent and/or poor domestic situations and have managed to buy land. Some, particularly some old and disabled women like Mme Josephine and Mrs Mari Magdelene, would have been completely destitute and owed their very survival to loans given by the programmes.

It was clear that social capital in the form of kinship, neighbourhood and market networks was a crucial part of women's economic activity. In addition to ROSCAs and work groups, informal networks with female and male kin and neighbours were crucial both in business development and survival in times of crisis. There was a strong cultural value placed on co-operation as a good thing in itself and even where profits from group activity were no higher than from individual activity, women were keen to engage in a range of forms of collective work to increase their access to networks and support. Some of these arrangements were very sophisticated, even where women were illiterate, and many women were extremely competent and innovative in negotiating and overcoming problems (see also Fonchingong, 1999). Some of the labour groups also had provision for childcare by older women. Many women, including very poor women, saw group activity as a means of addressing many of their problems. Very old and disabled women like Mme Josephine and Mrs Mari Magdelene were drawing on a range of informal networks to assist in marketing, and borrowing to join programmes and/or repay loans; they saw group rather than individual activity as the only way of meeting their needs.

Despite the fact that in all except the FIMAC programme loans were mainly for individual rather than group activity, the micro-finance programmes had contributed to new forms of collective activity as indicated by the cases in Box 4. Nevertheless, despite this abundance of social capital,

BOX 3: SOME CASES OF RELATIVE SUCCESS

Case 1: Mme Anna (CGT South-West Province): a young dynamic woman who has built up a tailoring business with a shop in one of the main markets. She attended a business training course through Mbonweh which she found very useful for showing her how to keep accounts. She was making about CFA 150,000 net profit per month. She employed five female apprentices to whom she was giving training; she paid CFA 8000 per month for six days work a week, and brought in extra people when she had big orders. She supplied a number of different types of seasonal and niche markets. In 1998 she applied for a loan of CFA 450,000 to buy raw materials. She kept her own income.

Case 2: Mrs Juliana (Mbonweh South-West Province): a member of Mbonweh since 1988 and very active on the Mbonweh Board although she is illiterate. Her husband used to work for Cameroon Development Corporation but when he retired he became an alcoholic and violent. She has taken a loan every year, starting with a first loan for CFA 2000. By 1998 she had bought her own land for CFA 100,000, one hour away from her home by public transport. She was hoping for a further loan of CFA 300,000 to set up her own shop for when she is too old to farm. Her children would continue to cultivate the land.

Case 3: Mrs Agnes (Mbonweh South-West Province): has nine children and eight grandchildren. Her husband drinks a lot, is violent and refuses to help her with either work or money. She took a Mbonweh loan and bought two poles of land for CFA 50,000 in her own name. Before that she had been renting land for CFA 10,000 per pole per year. She takes a loan each year for cultivation. She grows plantains, coffee, cocoyam and cassava.

Case 4: Mme Josephine (CGT West Province): An old widow of about 78, and disabled. She has four fields and gives out some of her land to others to cultivate in exchange for food. She sells some maize and manioc to buy oil and keeps the rest for herself and her children. She took a loan of CFA 38, 500 to buy three bags of fertilizer, two bags of manure and used the rest to buy medicines. Her grandchildren are sending the money for repayment. The loan has helped her greatly, particularly enabling her to buy medicines so that she is not constantly in pain. Despite (or perhaps because of) her individual problems, she wanted CGT to give the group a group grant of CFA 1 million to buy a push-push cart which the group would rent out to members, or to buy a maize grinding mill which they would operate as a group project.

Case 5: Mrs Mari Magdelene (Mbonweh South-West Province): a very old woman who buys and breaks groundnuts to sell to school children and has a small farm which she still cultivates. She herself has no children but neighbours and their children help her in return for food from her farm. Other people gave her the money to join Mbonweh and she received a loan of CFA 45,000. With this money she bought bunches of green bananas and sold these in front of her door. She is repaying the loan satisfactorily.

most women interviewed reported very low incomes and serious problems expanding their enterprises. It was clear that many of the enterprises were dependent on continual injections of loans from the programmes and would have folded if these had ceased to operate. While this is obviously an indication of the importance of these programmes to women's economic empowerment, questions also need to be asked about how far micro-finance in itself is sufficient and whether the contribution to empowerment would be increased through more effective training programmes to enable women to further develop and build on their existing networks and initiative.

BOX 4: GROUP ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES BY CGT MEMBERS

Group 1: Marketing in North-West Province: Ten women started a farming work group in 1990 working as labourers on other women's land in order to earn money for school fees. They then started a ROSCA with each member contributing CFA 500 every 3 weeks and a kitchen tontine contributing CFA 250. In 1996 they took CIPCRE training in group management and in 1997 they took a loan from Gatsby of CFA 350,000. They divided the money equally amongst themselves and each bought oil palm kernels. Then they put all the kernels together and gave them to the President to take to the processing plant in Bamenda. She brought back a receipt and then divided the profits amongst them, keeping the principal amount in CCEI Bank in Bamenda for reinvesting. They had been doing this on a small scale before the Gatsby loan but had been able to increase the scale of operation to sell between 600 kg and 1 ton twice a month. Income levels fluctuate because of the market and they do not have enough money to store for a long time. In a good month they earn CFA 55,000 and in the worst months CFA 5000. The group also received a FIMAC loan of CFA 850,000 repayable over two years to buy a push-cart, a kitchen grinding machine, a hoe and weighing scales for each member. They are all illiterate. According to the President 'groups are best because they get all sorts of other help from each other as well'.

Group 2: Mbonweh Women's Oil Co-operative: Ten women from five family groups who were involved in selling palm oil applied for a Gatsby loan of CFA 1,500,000 through Mbonweh to buy fifteen barrels of oil. Selling good quality palm oil from Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) is potentially very profitable, particularly in the rainy season when oil is scarce. However, CDC oil is only sold in large quantities and transportation costs are high. The CGT loan was slow in being sanctioned so Mrs Dorothy Atabong, Mbonweh Executive Director, acted as guarantor so that the elected President of the co-operative could go to other meetings and take loans at 25 per cent for 2 months. The women were so poor they did not have containers for the oil so some money was spent on equipment and containers. When the Gatsby loan arrived they bought the oil and divided it between them depending on ability to repay. The President bought the largest amount, three drums. Transport costs were CFA 45,000. Profit per drum was about CFA 15,000. They estimated they would need to sell five drums in order to make enough money to save. The women spent the money on the family: food, school fees and health. They did not reinvest in the oil business. They said there was a need for meetings with both men and women to persuade men to be more responsible so that women could save money from their earnings to invest in their businesses.

Importantly, low incomes were due not to so much to lack of women's social capital, but to constraints on access to resources in markets frequently perpetuated and maintained by men's 'social capital' formalized in macro-level discriminatory institutional relationships and structures. In agriculture powerful networks of local leaders and male family members enforced customary laws which only gave women rights of access through their husband's or father's lineage. This was the case in both patrilineal and matrilineal communities except in rare cases like that of Mme Ndenmen in Box 6 below. In South Littoral women rented small plots of land at high prices and with insecure tenure.¹⁷ Women are forbidden to plant permanent trees on both kinship and rented land and this effectively excludes them from ownership and marketing of the main cash crops: coffee, cocoa, rubber and oil palm. Only in South-West Province is purchase and sale of land much more common and women freer to plant the more profitable crops. In recent years women's access to land has further decreased because of a complex combination of increasing population pressure on land, land reform giving formal land titles to men and declining commodity prices which have led men to increase the area under their cash crops to maintain their incomes. In some cases chiefs and other powerful men have attempted to register ownership of clan land where women enjoyed usage rights (Fisiy, 1992).

In micro-enterprise women's incomes are seriously limited by a combination of gender segregation in markets, unequal 'vertical linkages' with middlemen/women, and macro-economic and institutional discrimination. A study of the effects of structural adjustment on women micro-entrepreneurs in Cameroon found that many worked for up to ten hours a day but had profits far below the monthly minimum wage and many ran at a loss.¹⁸ Markets in the main urban centres are highly competitive and are often divided by type of produce; the consequent physical gender segregation makes it even more difficult for women to enter traditionally male preserves because of their visibility in 'male space'. This means that women are excluded from sale of men's cash crops and from more lucrative butchery and sale of manufactured and technical goods. Markets for women's crops are largely dominated by middlemen and also middlewomen (called 'buyam-sellams') who have access to transport and capital for wholesale marketing in the large urban centres. Because of the perishable nature of the product, small-scale traders are forced to sell at very low prices. Women producers and traders also face considerable danger because of institutionalized extortion

17. Although it was possible for women to buy land it was very expensive and only one woman among those interviewed in this area had her own land. Rents were between CFA 50,000 and CFA 120,000 per ha per year. Women had security of tenure for as long as crops were in the fields and rent paid but the landowner (usually male) could take the land back after harvest if he got a higher bid.

18. Forje (1998), size of sample and methodology not stated.

and violence based on 'negative social capital' of collusion between transport drivers, government law enforcement officers including tax collectors, government officers and armed police at the numerous tax check points on main roads. This makes them particularly vulnerable to serious forms of sexual harassment and constant demands for bribes.

Control over Income: Challenging Intra-household Relations

A particularly serious shortcoming in current discussions of social capital from a gender perspective is the uncritical treatment of relations within households, families and kin groups. In the World Bank literature and elsewhere the 'family', seen as incorporating both the household and kinship relations, is seen as a primary source of social capital.¹⁹ The positive contributions of family and kinship ties to welfare and economic development are stressed with no discussion of intra-household and kin group inequalities.²⁰ The only recognition of any possible 'downside' is in terms of discouragement of formation of external economic networks and consequent implications for the operation of the free market. This lack of critical treatment is mirrored in much of the micro-finance literature where many policies are underpinned by assumptions of an ideal household unit of a husband, his wife and their children. This ideal household is generally treated as the basic unit of impact assessment and assumptions are made about mutual rights and responsibilities in, for example, collateral requirements under which women must get their husband's signature in order to get a loan. In many programmes group membership is confined to one member per household. It is assumed that relations within households are harmonious or that women will themselves be able to bring about any necessary changes without external intervention.

This complacency ignores the extensive literature on intra-household relations and kinship structures where gender inequalities in access to power and resources mean that the family is characterized more by 'co-operative conflicts' (Sen, 1990) than by Utopian harmony. Firstly, while it is true that for many women family ties are a crucial source of security, the boundaries of the 'family' do not necessarily conform to the Western stereotype implicit

19. For example on the World Bank social capital web site (2000) under 'Sources of Social Capital' the author writes: 'As the main source of economic and social well being for its members, the family is the first building block in the generation of social capital for larger society... Relations within the family foster the development of trust, essential for the formation of all outside relationships... family dynamics also encourage reciprocity and exchange, in other important factors in social capital generation. The material and emotional support shared freely between family members generate an implicit willingness to return the support... kinship ties are consequently vital sources of social capital for welfare and economic development'.

20. In this it largely follows idealization of the family in mainstream social capital writing by Putnam and Fukuyama. For a critique of their views see Putzel (1997).

in many micro-finance debates. As can be seen in the cases of poor women in Box 3, women may continue to maintain close ties with grandchildren or nephews and nieces, particularly when members of their own immediate household migrate. In Cameroon and much of Africa polygyny is a particularly contentious question whose incidence varies between ethnic groups. In some cases polygyny may be to women's benefit offering them access to important new female-based networks.²¹ Nevertheless it was clear from the focus group discussions that polygyny is strongly resented by many women where they have no say in men's choice of partner and was a major cause of female and child poverty. In polygynous households women have limited rights of support from husbands and junior wives or wives who had fallen out of favour were often very poor. These complexities need to be addressed in micro-finance policies regarding issues like collateral requirements and group membership. For example, junior wives within households may be seriously disadvantaged if only one loan is allowed per household.

Secondly, women's ability to use savings and credit to increase incomes under their control is seriously limited by hierarchical relations within households and kin groups. In all ethnic groups women are treated in customary law as dependants of men and are under their authority, a situation enforced by chiefs and local leaders, and women's rights are seriously limited in both patrilineal and matrilineal groups. Women's dependence is further reinforced by absence of traditional rights to either children or household property on divorce or widowhood. Although children are considered women's responsibility, they are seen as the property of their husband's lineage on divorce or widowhood and fear of separation from their children placed serious limits on women's bargaining power in marital disputes. Household property like house sites is also typically claimed by husband's kin unless legally registered in the wife's name.²² At the same time a woman's rights in her natal family are limited by the claims of any brothers' wives and in land-scarce areas like West Province there are increasing disputes between women over land (Gommans and van Alphen, 1991).

These rules and norms, although to some extent 'traditional', have become more unequal in recent years and have increased pressures on women. Women's customary non-market obligations to provide subsistence crops for their husbands and children have extended to obligations to provide cash for their families. Although women have an obligation to

21. One woman trader and volunteer social worker interviewed had chosen a second wife herself to help with childcare and housework (unfortunately it was not possible to interview the second wife to see how she felt!). In South West Province marriages appeared to be particularly unstable and women said a major problem was that many men did not want to marry at all because of bridewealth, and polygyny was increasing because women themselves wanted legal relations with men.

22. An extreme example at the time of the fieldwork was the savage murder of a woman by her dead husband's relatives because she had sought legal support to stay with her children in her marital home. Her dismembered body was left in pieces in a hotel room.

provide unpaid labour in cultivation of men's cash crops, they receive little assistance from their husbands with their own food crops and they therefore need cash to pay for labour. Although men are characterized as 'bread-winners', in practice women have limited rights to men's income and generally do not know how much their husbands earn. In some contexts, like the matrilineal Catholic community in North West Province, women felt men had become more responsible in contributing cash to the household. Elsewhere, however, women interviewed in the focus group discussions said that because of declining commodity prices men were now less willing to give money for household necessities. Domestic violence and high levels of male expenditure on alcohol and 'femmes du deuxième bureau' (mistresses) were reported to be common at all levels of society. Because of these increasing responsibilities and the insecurity of their claims on male income, women struggle hard to retain control of their own income. As one woman put it: 'African men will take whatever they can if they can get their hands on it'. Even women who accept gender inequality like Mme Ndenem (see Box 6 below) felt that women should not hand over any of their cash to men.²³

Group formation in the micro-finance programmes did appear to have strengthened women's ability to negotiate change, but mainly in areas where micro-finance had been explicitly promoted as a means of strengthening women's position and/or where these ideas had been promoted by other organizations as in the case of Mbonweh, CIPCRE and CGT in North-West and South-West Province. In CIPCRE, CGT and Mbonweh, staff were very gender aware and drew on traditional forms of organization and Christian egalitarian ideology to support women's rights, albeit cautiously and slowly. For many women interviewed in these programmes their increased incomes and participation in the micro-finance groups had led to changes in their role in decision-making in the household. In many cases this led to increased questioning of existing inequalities, adding to ongoing attempts to renegotiate roles and responsibilities.²⁴ In some cases, like those of Mrs Agnes and

23. These findings are also largely borne out by Fonchingong's research. He notes a sharp increase in women's contributions to men's cash crops and also an increase in women's management of the household budget. More than 60 per cent of the women members in twenty-five groups interviewed said they managed the household budget because they were better managers and carers. However, it is unclear how much of men's income was going into this joint budget and the women also complained that men squandered resources at their disposal on alcohol, women and social activities (Fonchingong, 1999).

24. For example a trainee at a BERDSCO 'family life training' when challenged by her husband for giving money to her natal family said 'She [sends money to her own family] because her husband did not join her in clearing the land she used for her farming, he did not join her in buying the seedlings. All these jobs were done by her mother and her brothers. Moreover she pays school fees for her children, the husband does not think about that, she even works in her husband's coffee farm and harvests food for his pigs, but at the end of the year, her husband still asked her to give him the money. She has been working for the year. She refused and said "to hell". All these made her to run away from the husband and stay alone for some time' (BERDSCO, 1997; English as quoted).

Mrs Juliana in Box 3, the contribution of such programmes had been substantial, giving women relative independence from abusive relationships. Many women used loans directly for their own health care. For some this represented expenditure by women on their own well-being which otherwise they would not have been able to afford and hence the programme had undoubtedly contributed to well-being. Even for better-off women interviewed physical conditions were still very hard. An unexpectedly high number of women interviewed had serious health problems because of malaria, typhoid, peri-natal complications and other problems.

Nevertheless in many ways the programmes were reinforcing women's responsibilities for household expenditure without enabling them to challenge unequal rights. Change was much less evident for CGT members in West Province and Littoral. Even in the areas where women had noted positive changes there were serious concerns that because women were able to get access to credit, husbands felt less obliged to give them their own money and there was less pressure on men to contribute to the household. Women were taking loans and incurring responsibility for repayment from low-income and barely sustainable economic activities, increasing their work burden, while men were the ultimate beneficiaries with an increase in disposable income. Women had high aspirations for their children and grandchildren and were paying school and college fees. Some were paying the costs of education for more distant relatives. What was worrying was the implicit assumption in many women's responses that they, rather than their husbands, should take on all the increasing burden of expenditure for the household. A clear example of this was one woman who noted with great pride that she now no longer had to 'beg' her husband for money to take her (and his) ill baby to hospital. In some cases, like members of the oil cooperative in Box 4, the women's enterprises would not have been sustainable without continuing injections of funds from the loan programme. The long hours of working in addition to housework, lack of adequate sanitary and other facilities, and low incomes also takes a serious toll on women's health, and illness among market traders is frequent (Makote, 1995; Singhateh, 1993).

It is clear therefore that, although households and families may be important sources of social capital, there is also a need to address the norms which regulate relations within them. Equally importantly, the demands on women's income must also be seen in the macro-economic context of increasing costs of living because of the combination of government corruption and structural adjustment programmes.²⁵ Inadequate and expensive health and education services, inadequate facilities for women in markets, transport difficulties, and so on, also increase both the problems women face and demands on their income.

25. A 30 per cent fall in consumption had been reported by an FAO study in 1996 (Afrique Agriculture Dossier Cameroun No 235 March 1996 quoted in Fournier, 1997) and the situation was widely agreed by those interviewed to have further worsened since that date.

Social and Political Empowerment

A further shortcoming of much of the literature is the idealization of 'community' seen as the other prime source of social capital.²⁶ Although a downside is recognized in the World Bank literature in the form of the stifling of individual creativity and exclusion, these concerns are generally absent from micro-finance discussions of women's empowerment which focus on harmonious horizontal relations between women. This is also true of the promotional literature of some of the micro-finance programmes (particularly the MC2s; see for instance Kacyem, 1996).

As discussed above, the strength of men's social capital within communities frequently serves to reinforce gender subordination in relation to access to community resources and markets as well as within the household. This subordination is also evident within mixed-sex programmes based on mutualist principles like those of the MC2s and CAMCCUL. Discrimination was particularly evident in the MC2s where, as in many credit unions and village banks, women form the majority of savers but were under-represented among borrowers and on decision-making bodies. This meant in effect that women's savings were being recycled as low-interest loans to men. In CAMCCUL some attempt had been made to address this through gender awareness training at different levels which had led to an increase in women borrowers and representatives.

Secondly, and importantly, power relations between women themselves are also very complex.²⁷ The 'social capital' of some women may operate to the serious disadvantage of others. The poorest women and most disadvantaged women may be excluded from tontines and other types of group.²⁸ Worryingly there were signs that programmes had in some cases increased inequalities within communities and within groups because of the emphasis on group repayment. Several groups in CGT cited as an explicit

26. In another example from the World Bank social capital web site (2000) the author notes: 'the quantity, quality and persistence of social interactions among neighbours, friends and members of groups and associations, generate social capital and the ability to work together for common good. This is especially important for the poor. Social capital can be used by the poor as a substitute for human and physical capital. Social capital can have a positive impact on the well-being and prosperity of an entire community, not only the households with a lot of social capital. Social capital increases with use, making it a particularly worthwhile investment . . . A country's political environment, cultural factors and, increasingly, the global economic environment can make it easier for social capital to flourish or fail at the community level'.

27. See Dean (1985) for an extremely interesting account of relationships between women in the village where she lived for a year.

28. In the same community as Group 3 in Box 5, it was estimated that about 30 per cent of women within the community were not in any group — 15 per cent because they were too poor, 8–9 per cent because they were not interested, and 6 per cent because their husbands would not let them.

policy the exclusion of the poorest and most disadvantaged. Within groups, loans were generally distributed unequally as in the case of Group 3 in Box 5, with the largest loans going to those who are more powerful in the community. While this is an understandable reaction to risk and by no means confined to Cameroon,²⁹ it does challenge the claims of many programmes that they are able to reach the poorest through reliance on borrower networks. In some cases there were also indications that inequalities increased over time and diversion of member funds to loan repayment was reducing amounts within the 'trouble funds' reserved for support of members in emergencies, as in the case of Group 4 in Box 5.

Furthermore, women who gain power within communities based on existing inequalities may support gender subordination, as can be seen from the case of Mme Ndenmen in Box 6. Her views were in contrast to those of most other women interviewed who openly questioned gender inequalities in the household and communities (see also BERDSCO, 1997; Vincent, 1976). These views were also at variance with those of the increasing number of active Cameroonian women's organizations engaged in advocacy and lobbying at different levels (Kouamo and Mbafor, 1997). Although she was one of only two women MC2 presidents, her MC2 had the lowest number of women borrowers among all the MC2s, indicating the dangers of relying on women leaders as the main source of change.

The programmes differed in the degree to which they actively sought to organize collective action for change. Mbonweh sought to build on women's networks to increase mutual support between women and to bring about change in society. The underlying Christian message placed a strong emphasis on collective action, mutual assistance, fairness and democracy and this in turn was taken to imply equitable relations between women and men and men's responsibilities for the family. Examples of mutual support include members' financial contributions to funerals of other members and their spouses and help with medical fees in cases of serious illness. There was also a concern with assistance for the very poor and, as in the cases in Box 3, some very poor women got assistance with share purchase to join the organization. In addition to the changes in the household of individual women, women also mentioned more general changes, particularly greater freedom and their ability to attend meetings late into the night.

The only case of organized collective action to address gender issues was in North-West Province. Here some of the groups supported by CIPCRE had engaged in collective action to address gender issues like domestic violence, as shown by the case in Box 6. The organizational context of the micro-finance groups in the mixed-sex Peasant Unions gave women a structure through which to publicize their case and enlist the support of men for change.

29. See the extensive literature on groups and social exclusion cited in van Bastelaer (nd).

BOX 5: INEQUALITIES WITHIN GROUPS AND POSSIBLE ADVERSE IMPACTS

Group 3: Unequal Division of Loans within Groups

In a CIPCRE group of forty women which had started as a security group in 1959, one of the component work groups of ten women had received a Gatsby loan of CFA 375,000 in 1997. CFA 216,000* of this was distributed as follows:

- 1) 30,000 for school fees and farm (President)
- 2) 20,000 for school fees and farm
- 3) 20,000 for farm and buyam sellam
- 4) 10,000 buying oil to sell from house
- 5) 10,000 buying oil to sell from house (very old woman)
- 6) 10,000 buying oil to sell from house (old woman)
- 7) 10,000 to clear farm and buy kerosene for sale
- 8) 10,000 to clear farm
- 9) 10,000 to clear farm and buy seed
- 10) 6000 to pay labour, keeping some for repayment (very old woman)

* Those present could not say how the rest of the money was used.

Group 4: An Example of Increasing Inequality and Insecurity within Groups

A tontine group in North West province started in 1992 as a women's Church group with nine members — eight women and one man engaged in mixed farming. They started as a money tontine and then turned into a work tontine. The man was a husband of one of the women who helped clearing land and doing 'difficult jobs' and liked the idea of a group. By 1997 they were a registered CIG with twenty-two members. They each contributed CFA 250 per month and maintained three funds:

- revolving fund: each member received their lump sum in rotation
- trouble fund: up to CFA 25,000 would be given to members in need
- savings fund: loan to members in urgent need at 20–25 per cent per month

For their first CGT loan they asked for CFA 500,000 and were granted CFA 300,000. Twelve members requested a loan of whom two were rejected because they did not repay tontine loans properly. Ten were given CFA 30,000 each: six used the loan for school fees but were repaying.

For their second CGT loan they asked for CFA 1 million and got CFA 700,000. This time they gave to a slightly different set of people, giving more to those who were investing in production (such as the secretary's problematic piggery) and less to traders.

Before the Gatsby loans they kept CFA 500,000 in the savings fund for on-lending; now there was only CFA 150,000 because members were putting spare money into Gatsby repayment and did not have any left for group savings.

BOX 6: SOCIAL CAPITAL AND SOCIAL CONTROL

Supporting Subordination: A Woman MC2 President

Mme Ndenmen was born in 1933 and had seven children and fifteen grandchildren. She was unusual in that her father had a commitment to improving women's position and had given her an 8 ha plantation on which she grew coffee and bananas. She went to school until she was eighteen and had to leave to get married. She had made a good marriage to a husband who was a government servant, and who unusually was firmly committed to monogamy. Mme Ndenmen lives in her own large house to which her husband comes to visit.

She was the founder of the MC2 as a locally respected person in the community and initially people had deposited savings with her to put in the Post Office until there were sufficient funds to start an MC2 bank. As a locally respected woman she was often involved in resolving marital disputes and other problems in the community. She was trying to increase the numbers of women on the MC2 council to at least three women, but this was difficult because women did not have time to do voluntary work, particularly as it was unpaid and they often had to come home late after meetings.

Despite her own eminent position, she felt that because of religious prescription, women were inferior to men ['women should not try to be equal to men because the Bible says they were made from the rib of Adam . . .'] and women should therefore put up with their problems. She believed that men still needed to feel that they were dominant in the household and women should flatter men to make them feel important. If they disagreed with men, women needed to be particularly sure that they were right. They should bring men into their house and always consult them in decisions. If the husband was polygamous, women should emphasize their responsibility and interest in the children, though women should never give men their money. Her own husband still gave her orders when he was at her house and sometimes insulted her. She also felt that poverty was very much the fault of the individuals concerned: 'poor people are the ones who don't work'.

Collective Action to Challenge Subordination

Group 6: This group started in 1959 as a women's security group of forty women to protect the women's land against incursion by the cattle of Mbororo herdsmen. The men in their community were not prepared to defend the women's land and some of them also had cattle which spoiled the women's fields. If cattle entered a woman's field the woman would call all the other women to chase them off and force the man to pay compensation. The forty women were divided into four work tontines of ten women each. Within the tontine work groups, older women looked after the children in return for their share.

By 1986 they also had a money tontine for the whole group contributing CFA 2000 per month, raised by 1998 to CFA 3000. This included an emergency fund of a minimum of CFA 20,000 which was loaned out at 5 per cent per month. They also fined late payers and members who came late for work and this money was put into the emergency fund. Allocation of this loan fund is decided by the committee.

When CIPCRE started work in the area they became part of the farmer's union. This gave them a forum within which to defend women's interests. Polygamy was common but it was felt by the women that this was an advantage for women because they could share work and so there has been no attempt to oppose this practice. The women have, however, succeeded in stopping domestic violence and rape in the community through taking a number of cases before the men's meeting and shaming the guilty man.

TACKLING THE DOWN SIDE: BUILDING ON SOCIAL CAPITAL

The evidence indicates therefore that women in Cameroon have shown considerable ingenuity and determination in their efforts to increase their incomes and ability to support their families. They also place a high value on collective organization for social as well as economic ends. However, existing organizations, networks and rules of association may be highly unequal. These inequalities may be exacerbated rather than reduced by the injection of capital through micro-finance. Where micro-finance programmes have merely used existing forms of social capital to reduce costs, benefits for women have been limited.

Castles Built on Sand? Social Capital and Financial Sustainability

Where the complexities of power relations and inequality are ignored, reliance on social capital as a mechanism for reducing programme costs may undermine programme aims not only of empowerment and poverty targeting but also financial sustainability itself. Repayment levels in all except the FIMAC programme were high. However, emerging tensions indicated inherent dangers in using social capital to cut costs in the context of other policies for financial sustainability. These problems and tensions, like those of social exclusion, are not unique to Cameroon and have been discussed at length elsewhere (see discussion and references in van Bastalaer, nd).

Firstly, as discussed above, the reliance on peer pressure rather than individual incentives and penalties may create disincentives and corruption within groups. The ways in which this social pressure operated varied between programmes. In CGT and BERDSCO it operated through mutual liability groups whereby members would not receive a further loan until all members had repaid and all members were, at least in theory, responsible for all the loans to the group. In CGT there were attempts to build up Federations in different areas, none of which would get a further loan until all had repaid. However, this was leading to problems because women who did repay could still not get a loan and so others were also refusing to repay. There were also indications that it was the better-off clients with larger loans — particularly men but also in some cases women — who caused repayment problems. Other alternatives to group pressure need to be considered: in Mbonweh, for example, loans were given to individuals in relation to savings and shares, further individual loans were withheld, and there was a strong emphasis on ideals of responsibility and solidarity, reference to Christian values and charismatic leadership.

Secondly, reliance on social capital of women clients also takes place within an increasing emphasis on strict economic accounting at the programme level and employment of professional banking staff. There is an inbuilt polarization within the paradigm between increasing salaries

for banking staff to be balanced by increasing voluntary contribution by programme clients in order to avoid excessive increases in interest rates. Tensions were becoming apparent in attempts to depend on voluntary contribution: MC2s and CAMCCUL were having problems finding people to fill voluntary decision-making posts. This was said to be one reason for under-representation of women because in the Cameroon context women have very little spare time after their work in production and unpaid domestic labour. Potential divisions between clients and programme staff on high salaries paid out of interest rates were becoming especially acute within programmes attempting to further decrease costs through reliance on voluntary input by local women leaders of Federations. A particularly prominent case was that of a princess in West Province who had been active in organizing a CGT Federation. Initially she was very hard working but was obviously anticipating reward in the form of social status (apparently, for example, being chosen as the CGT representative on visits abroad, despite her own denial of this). When this was not forthcoming she refused to repay her own loan, jeopardizing repayment of the whole Federation. These problems raise questions about how far increased reliance on voluntary contribution is possible without a commitment to social incentives and objectives throughout the organization, including paid staff.

Building on Social Capital: Some Possible Ways Forward

The Cameroon experience, however, and especially the evident enthusiasm of many women for collective activity, points to the possibility of building on existing social capital to increase contributions to poverty alleviation, empowerment and financial sustainability. This would entail building on existing horizontal organizations and developing new networks whilst working towards altering the nature of rules and norms where these are unequal. It also involves clear strategies for change at the macro-level rather than relying on micro-level 'self-help'. Some innovative initiatives by women themselves as well as proposals by programmes, ideas discussed by the author with women during the consultancy, and experience elsewhere,³⁰ all point to some ways forward which might be made both effective and cost-effective. These are summarized in Box 7.

Firstly, there is a need to build on the horizontal networks for mutual support. Increasing women's incomes is partly dependent on skills diversification and improved information about markets. On the basis of discussion with women in CGT, Mbonweh and CIPCRE, it was evident that many skills existed amongst the women themselves and it would be possible

30. Particularly SEWA in India. For references to issues raised here see Mayoux (2001, forthcoming).

for programmes to develop registers of needs and of grassroots trainers to facilitate mutual information exchange between women. In some cases this would be on a free exchange basis, in others women would pay each other. Programmes might further support this process through training trainers from among the women themselves, thus giving them an additional source of income. Information exchange between women with similar backgrounds and problems would make training both more relevant to needs and cheaper, although there would be a continuing need for external professional training on some issues.

For many women, marketing assistance is also necessary, particularly in the Cameroon context because of extortionate tolls and taxes and the extent of corruption. However, the experience of formal marketing co-operatives in Cameroon as elsewhere has been generally negative. For example, of all the FIMAC loans given for such co-operatives none had led to the successful setting up of such a co-operative and most had not been repaid. Nevertheless there are possibilities for developing activity-based associations either within individual programmes or across programmes to develop linkages between women at different ends of the marketing chain, to improve information flows about markets and also to identify ways in which women could enter more lucrative markets dominated by men.

BOX 7: BUILDING ON SOCIAL CAPITAL — WAYS FORWARD

Developing Horizontal Networks

- **training innovations:** setting up a register of skills and training needs, facilitation of mutual information exchange, training of grassroots trainers
- **marketing interventions:** formation of activity-based associations to provide opportunities for women at different ends of the marketing chain to exchange information about marketing strategies (including successful group strategies)

Challenging Vertical Inequalities

- **individual and group 'strategic plans'** for challenging gender inequality at the local level
- **addressing exclusion:** provision of services for poor women
- **'Men for change'** groups at local level and attending trade fairs and AGMs

Macro-Level Change

- federations to lobby for benefits to poor informal sector traders
- a broad-based movement for gender advocacy

Secondly, there is a need to challenge vertical inequalities between women and men and amongst women themselves. Programme contribution to women's empowerment could be enhanced through using micro-finance groups as an entry point for mutual information exchange to encourage a more strategic approach by women to savings and credit use and for promotion of role models and collective action to address some of the macro-level constraints. This could be done by producing individual and group 'strategic plans' for increasing incomes and empowerment as part of the loan application procedure. As part of this process there is also a need to address the problem of exclusion of poor women and how their needs can be addressed within programmes.

Thirdly, it is crucial for programmes to consider strategies for men. As noted above some programmes including CICIPRE, CAMCCUL and BERDSO had programmes for gender training. These were all said to have led to changes in male staff and client attitudes, decreasing prejudice against giving loans to women. BERDSO had also funded the husbands of female trainees to attend the training and reports noted a subsequent decrease in resistance to women's income earning. As noted above, some men were supportive of their wives' activities. Some chiefs were supportive of change in many of the most oppressive forms of gender subordination. There is therefore an important potential role for programmes in bringing more progressive men together as a force for change within their communities, and at national level.

Finally, in the Cameroon context as in many countries, the potential for change by individual programmes is limited. Although gender lobbies have stressed the importance of gender advocacy to remove constraints on women's participation in the formal banking sector and to increase access to productive resources and marketing, in practice advocacy and networks have so far been largely confined to micro-finance issues like removal of subsidized interest rates from competing programmes. Micro-finance programmes need to join together and collaborate with other organizations working to challenge gender subordination. In North-West Province this was already being done and a number of organizations were collaborating in research, training and lobbying.³¹ Elsewhere there were also increasingly vocal women's organizations,³² although these had not so far been linked

31. Through a Forum of Women's Information Co-ordination (FOWIC) comprised of VIWO, CICIPRE, CAMCCUL, Ministry for Social Affairs, a number of other micro-finance and environmental NGOs and AWICO, an NGO particularly active in the field of women's rights. AWICO provided institutional gender training for CAMCCUL which was said by the gender trainer in CAMCCUL to have led to important changes in their organization.

32. In South-West Province a women's advocacy organization, FIDA, was set up by a group of magistrates organizing women on women's rights in 1992 as part of a world-wide movement. At the time of the fieldwork, Mbonweh was discussing the possibility of linking with this programme in some way.

with micro-finance programmes. The necessity for inter-organizational collaboration is likely to become even more acute in the context of recent moves by the Cameroon government to control and monitor all NGO activity. A possible forum for this would be to hold annual Trade Fairs cum Annual General Meetings which could in the longer term be more or less self-financing through sponsorship and fees on sales. These could build on current initiatives by CGT to include invitation of outside speakers on gender issues, development of networking and advocacy strategies.

Tackling the Down Side: The Wider Implications

Micro-finance which builds on and develops women's networks through group activities has considerable potential to contribute to women's empowerment. However this potential is being undermined by current 'Micro-finance Best Practice' which focuses on financial sustainability and does not seek to build on interlinkages between micro-finance and other development aims.³³ None of the above problems is unique to Cameroon. The current preoccupation with social capital and its lack of analytical rigour risks further marginalizing attention to the underlying and critically important issues of gender inequality in resources, rights and power. Unless micro-finance programmes move beyond complacent assumptions about automatic contributions of group formation to women's empowerment they risk becoming little more than yet another cynical self-help means of shifting the costs of development onto poor women. Women themselves will seek to manipulate programmes to the best of their ability, undermining both poverty targeting and financial sustainability.

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33. For more detailed discussion of experience elsewhere see Mayoux (2000) and (2001, forthcoming).

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