

# A Deacon in Cameroon

*by Dn. Tracy E. Longacre, Diocese of California, awaiting a new overseas assignment*

The nation of Cameroon sits just below Nigeria on the western coast of Africa. Officially, it is part of Central Africa (West Africa being north of Nigeria) and shares a currency with its neighbors Chad, Gabon and Equatorial Guinea. From top to bottom, it is about the same size as California. English is the language of two of the nine Provinces (the North West and South West, both of which border Nigeria), while French is spoken in the other seven Provinces. The country is officially bilingual, but because the capital is in the Francophone part of the country, and the opposition is based in the Anglophone part of the country, in practice the government is Francophone.

There are two major cities: Yaoundé, which is the capital, and Douala, which is the center of business. There are also capital cities in each of the nine Provinces which are much smaller but still vibrant commercial centers. The fact that there are cities in each Province has meant that the population is much more broadly distributed throughout the country than is true in many other African countries. Uganda, for instance, has only one major city, Kampala, so the vast majority of those wishing to leave the rural areas go to Kampala. The same is true in Kenya where most people migrate to Nairobi. In contrast, Cameroonians mostly move from the village to their Provincial capital. Overall, this offers a better quality of life to a greater number of people, but it also means that there is a greater need for basic services over a larger geographic area. Given regional favoritism and cultural differences, this can be problematic (more on that later).

I went to Cameroon in September 2006 on a two-year assignment as a volunteer fundraising and organizational development advisor with VSO (Voluntary Service Overseas). Initially, I was posted at the Presbyterian Rural Training Centre in Fonta, about 25km from Bamenda, the capital of the North West Province. Although I was reassigned after eight months, I look back on my time there fondly and realize in retrospect that it was a great introduction to the country. I was taught how to haggle with the women in the market over the price of tomatoes, how to spot a good deal on used clothes, how to eat Cameroonian food, and how to live with very intermittent basic infrastructure (like water and electricity). I also learned a lot about the life and challenges of farmers and others who live in the villages and the on-the-ground effects of government policies. And for my birthday, I adopted a beautiful kitten from my neighbors, the Samas, and named her Shivaya.

PRTC needed help in fundraising. The Centre was founded in 1962 by German Presbyterians and was run by “white people” until 8 years ago. Originally, it was thought that PRTC could be self-sustaining by managing a large cattle herd and having other income-generating projects (chickens, pigs, etc.) However, over time it became clear that the local economy was not big enough to support the Centre in this way. They were funded, almost completely, by Bread for the World for a couple of decades and a few years ago, Bread for the World informed them that they would stop funding because their Board had instituted a policy that no single organization could receive funding for more than nine years. They were given another couple of years of funding, during which time they did not raise any more money, then Bread for the World gave them a final one-year “transition” grant that covered only basic expenses, to give them more time. When I arrived in September of the year when funding would end in December, they had submitted exactly one proposal to one organization.

It was soon clear to me that, although the Centre did excellent work, their funding model (having one donor that funded the entire operation) was not viable. Although they had been running the Centre for eight years, they still looked to their donor to tell them what they should be doing. I could see that

they needed to both alter their way of thinking and restructure how the Centre was run, or at least the way they talked about it. They viewed it as an agricultural school that did some extension work (the head of PRTC is even called the Principal). However, in reality, they spent much more time and reached many more people through their field work than through the year-long training course they provided. They needed change, big change, and they did not have much time. This was very challenging.

In the meantime, the desk officer at Methodist Rural Development Foundation in the UK, where they had sent their one proposal, went on maternity leave and was replaced by someone unfamiliar with PRTC. She sent back the proposal with many, many questions and I became part of the team to rewrite



***Eric Ngang, NWADO Coordinator and Ibrahim Peghoua, Senior Programme Manager sign the five-year agreement.***

it. This was an excellent exercise and really taught them a lot about how to talk about their work, their accomplishments, the results they produced and what they thought was needed to improve the quality of life for farmers in the North West Province. Over the course of a month, we completely re-wrote the proposal. Funding ran out at the end of December,

so everyone stayed on holiday through January and at the end of January, we heard that MRDF was going to fund the proposal for three years. Phew! Now there was some breathing room to make the wholesale changes needed in the Centre's operations.

However, seeing clearly what needs to change and being ready to make those changes are very different things and after several months, it became clear that PRTC was not prepared to move forward with this work as quickly as would keep me occupied there. At the same time, VSO was in the midst of redesigning its strategy in Cameroon and they wanted me to help launch the new Participation & Governance program in the North West Province. So, I moved from PRTC in to the town of Bamenda in April of 2007. For the first 6 months or so, I worked with three different organizations: COPAAP (a village-based AIDS program), UCCC (an association of local governments in the Province), and NWADO (an association of local civil society organizations). "Civil Society" is a fairly new term being used in the development community to include all those outside of government or business who are working to improve the society – not only not-for-profit organizations, but also trade unions, human rights lawyers, community groups and cooperatives. In addition to these three organizations, I also worked to help VSO identify new partner organizations for the Participation & Governance Program.

As some of you may know, Cameroon has a reputation for being one of the most corrupt countries in the world. In the latest Transparency International ratings, Cameroon's score improved somewhat, but it is still high on the list. Unlike other places I have been in Africa where corruption is very common in the government bureaucracy, but only occasionally affects people at the local level, the corruption in Cameroon is endemic in the society. Students as young as 14 regularly attempt to bribe their teachers to give them good grades, for instance. In an attempt to address this situation, and to promote and encourage the decentralization process that had been voted into law, VSO created the Participation & Governance program. The objectives are to strengthen the civil society so that they are able to effectively advocate for those in need of basic services; to strengthen the local councils so that they are able to provide basic services in their communities, particularly in the areas of education and HIV/

AIDS; and finally to connect the civil society and the local councils so they can work together.

Along these lines, I spent a few months working with the UCCC-NW (United Cities and Councils of Cameroon, NW province) because VSO thought this organization would provide the best avenue to work with the local councils. After several months working there, I realized that the man who was the Coordinator was so ineffective and corrupt that it would be detrimental for VSO to work with him and the Board of UCCC-NW were not interested in replacing him. So I advised VSO against creating this partnership and they went on to contact local councils individually.

At COPAAP (Community Partnership Against AIDS Program) and NWADO (North West Association of Development Organizations), my work was focused on strengthening them as organizations. I also consulted with several other civil society organizations throughout Bamenda that were either VSO partners or members of NWADO. I worked with COPAAP part-time for a few months to assess their accounting and reporting systems and make recommendations to get them up to the standard needed for COPAAP to get international funding.

Because of the high level of corruption in Cameroon and the obstacles the government puts up to independent NGOs (non-governmental organizations), there are very few of them operating in the country. Compared to Uganda or Kenya or Ethiopia or most other places in Africa, it is quite a stark contrast. In a country where you would expect hundreds, if not thousands, of international NGOs, there are less than 20. This has some interesting implications. One is that much of the funding available to local organizations comes from government aid agencies (like USAID). But these agencies have to cooperate with the Cameroonian government, so when the Cameroonian government says there is no need for these agencies to work in the North West Province, they have to pull out. DED (an arm of the German government development agency) had a program focused on strengthening the civil society in the North West, but they had to end it and move their operation to Bafoussam, in the francophone West Province.

Another implication of the lack of independent (not governmental agencies) international NGOs in Cameroon is that local Cameroonians are not receiving on-the-job training in how to operate in the field of international development. In other parts of Africa, in addition to the hundreds of inter-



***NWADO Members work to create their five-year strategic plan.***

national NGOs, there are thousands of local NGOs, most of them founded by people who were (or still are) staff of the international NGOs. Through their work, they learn the expectations of international donors and the standards of accounting, reporting, monitoring and evaluation. They learn good management practices and they develop relationships with people and organizations on the local and international development scene. Very little of this happens in Cameroon. So local Cameroonian organizations generally have very weak or poor management and they don't understand the expectations of international donors. Combine that with the fact that they have been surrounded by what outsiders would consider corruption their whole lives, and you can see that their relationships with international donors can be difficult.

This was the situation at COPAAP. The doctor who founded the program was a good doctor and he ran the best private clinic in Bamenda. One could see that he was also a decent businessman because his clinic was profitable and

providing jobs for close to one hundred people. The structure of the COPAAP program was quite good – sensitize local villages about HIV/AIDS, setup clinics and train local health care workers to do home visits and provide anti-retroviral drugs locally. They were also designing income-generating projects so that the clinics had a way to be sustained. On the strength of this program design, they received a grant from CARE. However, when they reported back to CARE about how they spent the money, there were all sorts of things done wrong. Staff, materials and money were commingled between the clinic and COPAAP, three quotes were not received for major purchases, etc. My job was to review their reports and recommend changes they needed to make so that they could receive a large chunk of back funding from CARE and be in a better position to receive further international funding.

I did my research and created my recommendations, but there were a lot of management issues and shortly before I left most of the staff had been fired. I hope the next VSO volunteer who is going to work there (starting this September) will be able to take up the mantle. One of the consequences of being a temporary volunteer is that you often do not know the outcome of your work.

I started working with NWADO part-time simultaneous to working with COPAAP and UCCC, then was assigned there (mostly) full-time when I had completed the other two assignments. With NWADO, I started the first VSO Organizational Development self-assessment process.

I helped VSO develop an Organizational Development self-assessment process which they adopted as a required first step for all their partner organizations. It is a great process and really helps both the organization – to articulate its strengths and weaknesses – and the volunteer – to know what work is going to make the biggest difference. Over time, I think this will greatly enhance VSO's effectiveness as a development organization and the volunteers' impact (and therefore their satisfaction).

At NWADO, we began the Organizational Development process with an Orientation which was intended for our members, but was better attended by non-NWADO members! Clarifying the meaning of membership was clearly one of our tasks. Out of the Orientation, we identified the groups we needed to include in the assessment process and determined the makeup of the OD Committee. The OD Committee would coordinate the work of the assessment process, the end result of which would hopefully be a 5-year agreement between NWADO and VSO to work together to strengthen NWADO.

After setting up the OD Committee, the first phase of the process was to conduct interviews and surveys to determine NWADO's current state – similar to a 360° performance review on the organization. We did a document & policies audit and an IT audit and we did in-person and e-mail interviews with representatives from the following groups: staff & Board, members, donors and partners, and non-members. The non-members group was added to the list by the OD Committee because they wanted to gain some insight into why NWADO had only 12-15 members when there were hundreds of local development organizations around. Due to NWADO's small size (one employee, Eric Ngang, the Coordinator) and the hands-on management by the Board, I interviewed Eric and all of the Executive Committee. This phase was very interesting as we began to see the differing perceptions of NWADO held by different groups. We also began to see some of the areas where NWADO was very strong and did not really need to do any work to improve. This phase culminated in a Self-Assessment Workshop attended by representatives from all NWADO member organizations. I facilitated this workshop, which was a lot of fun, and in the end we had clearly identified NWADO's areas of strength and weakness and the priority areas for improvement. From this work, the OD Committee created 1-year and 2-5 year objectives and then a 1-year workplan. This product became the basis for the 5-year agreement which VSO signed with NWADO at the end of January 2008. NWADO was the first organization to complete the OD Assessment process and it was a smashing success. The program staff at VSO were now clear that following this process was going to be beneficial and they started to roll it out to all the programs. I was now assigned to work full-time with NWADO to implement their first year plan, but I did a lot of consulting on the side with other volunteers and their organizations as they undertook this same OD process.

One great outcome of this, for me personally, was that I started to do a lot of group facilitation, which is something I love to do and am very well-trained (and good) at. In my last six months in Cameroon, I assisted in the facilitation of the Self-Assessment workshops at several other organizations, led a Strategic Planning workshop for NWADO and another for YOP (the Youth Organizing Project), led workshops on Good Governance and Human Rights, and finally developed and led a Group Facilitation Methods training for VSO volunteers (including those in the Far North province), NWADO members and VSO partner organizations. In addition, I helped Eric put on NWADO's annual Open Days – a sort of convention of local civil society organizations where they get to meet, find out about each other's work and debate current hot topics. We also got involved in a program called PASOC (a French acronym) which was a joint Cameroon government and European Union program to strengthen the civil society in the country. NWADO has now applied to be PASOC's "focal point" in the North West Province which would be a great boost and help them fulfill their mission of connecting their members to the resources they need.

How quickly the two years passed! With a new volunteer on board to replace me at NWADO and verbal offers of new positions for me in Zambia (through VSO) and the Solomon Islands (as a UN Volunteer), it was time for me to leave Cameroon. Overall, I found my experience interesting, fun, and satisfying. I was doing the work of development that really needs to be done – sharing skills, empowering local professionals, addressing the unique local situation. It is work that is slow to show results, isn't very romantic or "flashy", but I know my two years in Cameroon made an impact that will last.