

Reflections on the Role of Plantations in Development: Lessons from the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC)

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Abstract

Plantation agriculture under the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC) registers an average annual turnover of over 50 billion FCFA. The corporation is hailed as a major contributor to development in Cameroon. However, conceptualizing development in terms of inequality reduction through the increase in social benefits to disadvantaged groups paints a completely different picture of the corporation. Empirical work shows that although farm labourers are central to the corporation's economic success, they are yet to fully benefit from the proceeds of plantation agriculture. The lack of significant improvements in residential and income standards of the multitude of the CDC farm labourers contradicts the view of the corporation as a "development" agent. The corporation has seemingly maintained a deplorable social responsibility record wherein farm labourers are the sacrificial lambs in the quest for increased economic output which is then proclaimed as "development". This paper contradicts the praises sung by different authors to the CDC as an agent of development by giving an insight on the living conditions of a majority of the workers of this parastatal. It therefore looks beyond gross economic outputs by providing knowledge on what really trickles down to the underprivileged majority.

Keywords

plantations, development, living conditions, inequality, CDC

1. Introduction

The economies of most developing nations have largely depended on agriculture (plantations especially) for their economic take off. One of the legacies of the colonial masters in Africa was the establishment of plantations which in effect were a source of raw material for their home industries. In Cameroon for example, plantation agriculture under the CDC (the second largest employer after the government) Pamol and, SOCAPALM, among others, are legacies of European administration. The presence or creation of these plantations have been greeted with a lot of fanfare as they are believed to be agents of

economic, social and infrastructural development (Kimengsi & Lambi, 2015; Forba, 2015; Fossung, 2001). No doubt, these plantations are good revenue generators and as such, they could be described as development agents. However, a close look at the living conditions of the majority of people reveals that the basic human development indices (food, shelter, water and clothing) for development seems to be far-fetched (cited in Karush, 1974). In major plantation camps in the world such as in East Kalimantan and in the Haitian Sugar cane plantations, similar situations of deprivation are observed (Haug, 2010; Cooper, 2006). Most plantation economies have been characterized by growth that does not benefit the masses. For instance, in the Philippines plantation development was ineffective in delivering growth that benefited the poor; the export-oriented economy was controlled by the landed *elite*, who adversely incorporated the poor into their plantations (Chronic Poverty Research Centre, 2009).

The plantation system creates non-economic forms of poverty within the sector, which in turn influences household economic decisions. It is also less than successful in creating a dynamic and profitable industry, and this additionally constrains the upward mobility of residents within the sector. A critical consequence is the residents' feeling of exclusion and marginalization (CEPA, 2005). In the characterization of poverty and well-being in the estate sector of Srilanka, it is observed that while income and consumption (in terms of wages, household expenditure) are at the core of understanding poverty, other elements such as health and personal attributes are also very strongly articulated. Reports show that the overall living conditions within plantation camps have deteriorated over the last 15 years, particularly in the tea sector (CEPA, 2005). Such situations of poverty and underdevelopment are evident in the CDC. The CDC is an agro-industrial enterprise incorporated in 1947 with the mission to acquire, develop and operate extensive plantations of tropical crops. The CDC owes its origin to former German Plantations in Cameroon. A close study into the manifestation of development by the corporation gives us some startling revelation. If development implies making sure that all basic necessities for human survival is available to everyone, then it is clear that the CDC is yet to fully achieve its development objectives.

The concept of development goes far beyond income and GNP to standards of living, human freedoms, equality and in its least form, the society that has adequate food, shelter, clothing, education and health (Porter et al., 2004). The situation of a majority of the labourers, who in effect are the income generators show that they face deplorable living conditions characterised by poor toilet facilities and dilapidated structures which exposes them to health risks. The low income class is exposed to social, economic and psychological poverty which seems a perennial issue, transferred from one generation to the other.

Development is contextualized in line with the ideas of Rodney (1973), Fossung (2001) and Porter et al. (2004). Rodney (1973) observed development as a multi-dimensional or multifaceted concept which does not limit itself to economic growth but it also involves structural, institutional, cultural, political and social transformation. It is seen as all the processes that translate into the reduction in abject or

absolute poverty, a reduction in the level of unemployment, a reduction in the level of personal and regional income inequality, an increase in the real output of goods and services, improvements in the techniques of production, improvement in literacy, health services, housing conditions and government services, improvement in the levels of social and political consciousness of the people and greater ability of the people or the general population to draw from the local resources (human and material) through hard work to meet both the local and external needs. Going by the ideas of Fossung (2001), the CDC is a major development agent in the region and Cameroon as a whole. Development is also viewed in terms of economic growth and enhanced freedoms (Figure 1) as observed by Porter et al. (2004). Development is seen not only as economic growth and increasing incomes; it is also viewed in the light of increasing material goods, providing basic needs, enhancing freedoms, redistribution of resources, expanding choices, empowerment, increased participation, enhancing human rights among others. All these attributes according to Porter et al. (2004) are the basis for which we could measure development.

It is sad to comment that of these attributes, development as economic growth through increasing incomes seems to be the only feature in the CDC. Worse still, such incomes are not reflected in the expanding human capabilities, provision of basic needs and others. So in the context of this study, the CDC cannot be termed a development corporation because development in effect is intended to free the poor from their suffering. The concept could however, be used by the corporation as a blueprint for its development objectives so that resources can be equitably distributed. In this paper, we argue that the role of the CDC as a development partner needs to be revisited to consider key aspects of development. We equally maintain that the CDC has the potential to address the situation and there is a possibility for the corporation and other, stakeholders to adopt a policy of equitable redistribution of services and income so that the majority of poor could be liberated from the social, economic and psychological poverty which is very much reminiscent of the CDC as empirical evidence reveals.

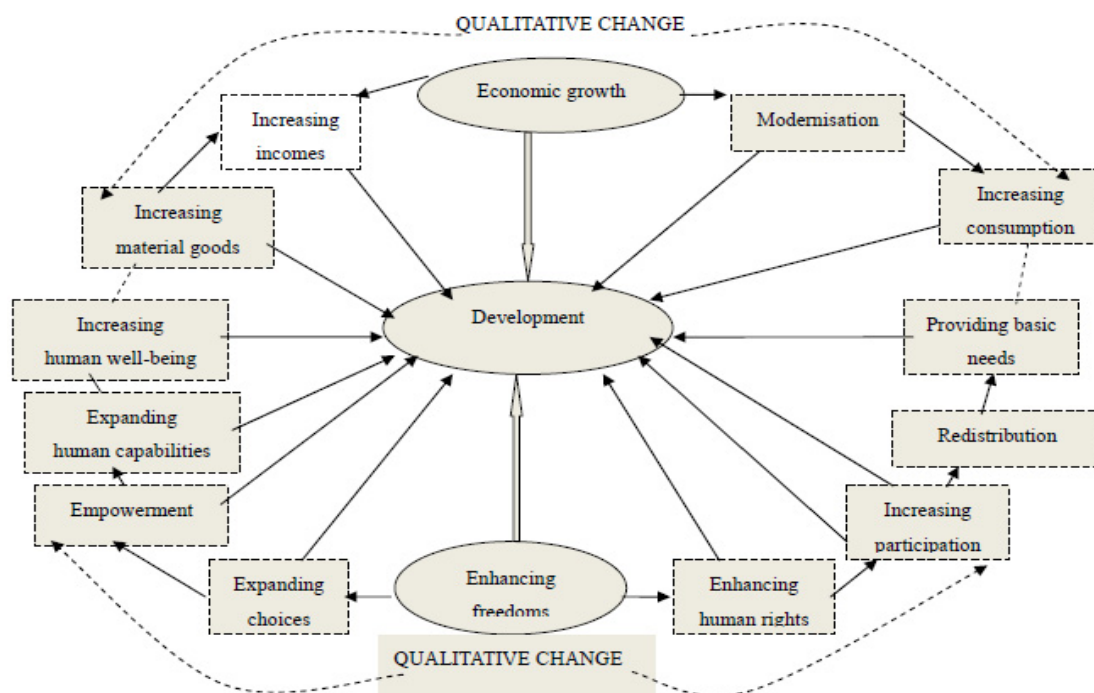


Figure 1. Development as Economic Growth and Development as Enhanced Freedoms

Adapted from Potter et al., 2004, p. 16.

2. Method

2.1 Study Area

The CDC (Figure 2) is an agro-industrial enterprise incorporated in 1947 with the mission to acquire, develop and operate extensive plantations of tropical crops. It is located in the South West and Littoral regions of Cameroon. The CDC concentrates in the production of three crops, these include rubber, oil palm and banana, covering a surface area of 41,874 hectares (CDC Budget Booklet, 2011). The current annual production for these crops is 18,744 tons of processed rubber, 12,355 tons of palm oil, and 100,952 tons of premium quality bananas (CDC Budget Booklet, 2011). The average annual turnover since 2008 has been above 50 billion CFA francs. This corporation employs about 22,431 workers, the second largest employer in Cameroon after the government.

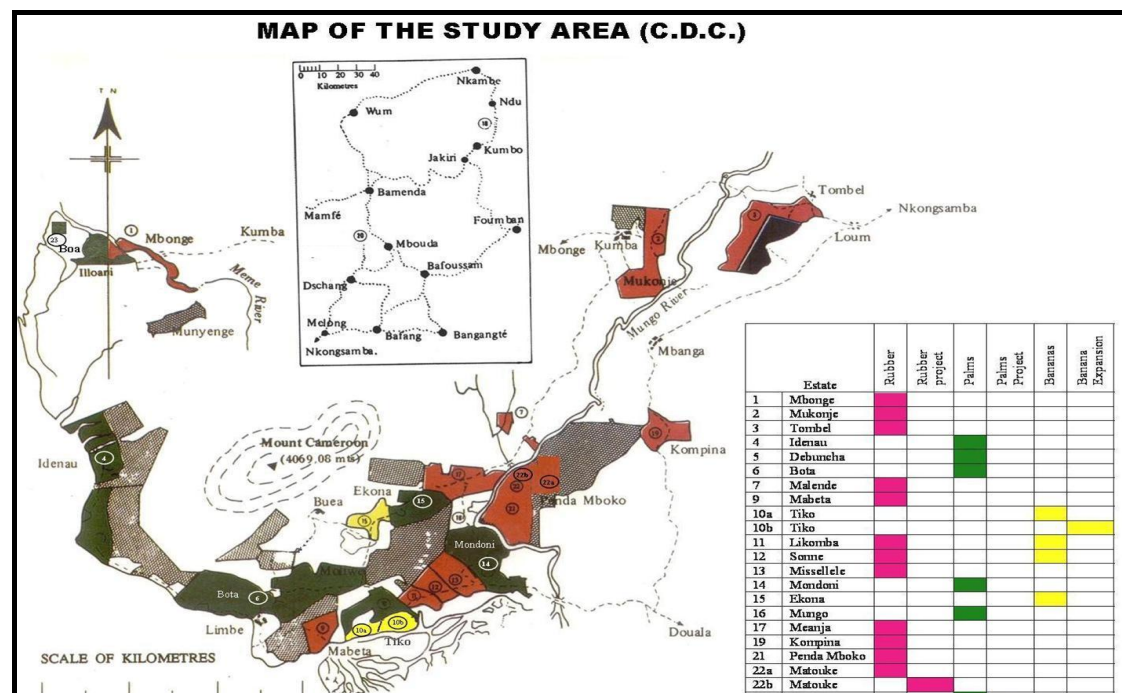


Figure 2. Location of CDC Plantations (CDC Budget Booklet, 2011)

2.1.1 Research Methods

This study made use fieldwork, in-depth interviews, Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and personal observation. Interviews were conducted in four areas; CDC camps in Tiko, Moliwe, Ekona and Penda Mboko. A total of 120 persons (30 from each camps) were randomly selected for interviews (Table 1). There was bias in the interviews as mostly the labourers and low grade workers were targeted; because it was believed that they would provide first-hand information on their plight unlike the top cadres who seem not to feel their pain and therefore can conceal relevant information. In all four camps, the responses obtained were strikingly similar and also, some respondents concealed some information regarding their housing and toilet conditions due to this case therefore, the researcher adopted personal observations to be able to assess the situation for analysis to be done. Photographs were also taken to depict the deplorable housing and sanitary conditions.

Table 1. Number of Persons Interviewed

No	Camps	No of persons interviewed
1	Tiko	30
2	Moliwe	30
3	Ekona	30
4	Penda Mboko	30
	Total	120

Source: Field Work, 2014.

Secondary sources of data came principally from the consultation of the previous ideas of scholar on plantation and development. The works of Fossung (2001) and Wanie (2006) who had initially hailed the CDC as a development agent was reviewed and contradicted. The ideas of Rodney (1973) on the tentacular dimensions of development were viewed while that of Porter et al. (2004) on development guided the critical analysis of the CDC. Based on the interactions through interviews and FGDs, complemented by secondary sources, the researcher heavily employed the content analysis approach to examine the issues of underdevelopment within the selected plantation camps. The study preferred the use of content analysis in order to clearly analyse without eliminating or suppressing the views expressed through interviews and focus groups discussions. This saw the transcription and examination of participant's diverse opinions. One of the key challenges observed for this method employed is the fact that it does not show in quantitative terms the degree to which these challenges exist. Furthermore, the method did not present a simulation model on future developmental scenarios in line with CDC's worker's livelihood improvement policy. However, the study preferred the use of content analysis in order to clearly analyse without eliminating or suppressing the views expressed through interviews and focus groups discussions. Such an analytical strategy was chosen because it could clearly portray the intricacies associated with the question of development and underdevelopment as perceived by the camp dwellers. This gives a better insight on the situation for informed policy directives. Although there was a possibility for quantitative analysis, at least through the use of percentages, this was avoided because of the observed skepticism in providing adequate and relevant data by the population. Consequently, caution was employed in order to avoid a situation of over or under representation of the actual situation on the ground. Hence, it was preferable to interact and deduce from the series of discussions their views of the current situation.

3. Result

The CDC remains the second largest employer after the government of Cameroon, and generates over 52 billion FCFA per year from the sales of its products (Table 2). Such an earning contributes significantly to the gross domestic production of Cameroon. But the main problem with this corporation rests on the social responsibility aspect of it which deals with the welfare of the masses who essentially are the engines of the company.

Table 2. Total Revenue of CDC between 2006-2008 (Million FCFA)

	2006	2007	2008
Rubber	21,482	23,945	28,938
Palm products	4,554	4,388	4,363
Banana	23,367	18,746	18,736
Others	2	2	4
Total	49,405	47,081	52,041

Source: CDC Annual Reports.

Based on field evidence, the social deprivation or put more comfortably, inadequacy are viewed in the light of the provision of education, health, income, water supply, housing, toilets and an evaluation of the morality situation of the area.

As far as housing is concerned, most of the sampled CDC residential quarters (camps) are characterised by a huge population of unskilled workers who live in slums characterised by poor living conditions—crime and violence, poor housing conditions, poor health and sanitary conditions, and waste disposal problems among others. This problem becomes onerous when we discover that the population of these groups of people is increasing and the authorities are yet to make provisions for infrastructural expansion to accommodate the teeming population. The structures are fast deteriorating. Field reports disclosed that effective refurbishment of these settlement camps had stopped since the 1980s and till date, these houses have not only faced pressure and deterioration, but they have been virtually neglected by the powers that be (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Dilapidated but Occupied Structure in Ekona

A total of 50 homes were randomly sampled in each of the four CDC residential areas visited in Tiko, Moliwe, Lysoka and Penda Mboko. This was necessary to identify the number of rooms or living space available for workers and the utilities found in these living quarters. It was found that more than 80% of the houses consisted of just a single room and parlour with a few two or more rooms available to some intermediate staffs (Table 3). These houses were designed for single individuals during the Colonial days, but today they are forced to accommodate an average of 6 persons per house. This has not only increased the room density, it has exacerbated the dilapidation of these structures which have been stretched beyond their carrying capacities. The current situation has given room to a high degree of unsanitary conditions which is further reflected in the prevalence of diseases and the mounting moral decadence. At the same time, the kitchens of the houses visited have been transformed to bedrooms while the living rooms also serve as a bedrooms. This has however not solved the problem as the room densities are still very high.

In another dimension, the poor living conditions experienced within plantation camps (congestion, poor sanitary, hygiene conditions, moral decadence, crime and violence) creates a possible avenue for the proliferation of diseases. This has been compounded by the spread of HIV/AIDS and other STDs which is fast engulfing these camps. We could term these residential areas a “population in transit”. The top administration living in clean environment, having a higher pay package can take care of their health issues while the low class workers who are exposed to all sorts of health risk, use their meager wages to pay for health.

Table 3. Sampled Housing Conditions in Some CDC Residential Areas

<i>Camps</i>	<i>Number of Houses sampled</i>	<i>Single Room houses identified</i>	<i>Average number of persons</i>	<i>No of houses which transformed kitchen to rooms</i>
Tiko	50	38	6	48
Moliwe	50	33	5	45
Ekona	50	40	7	47
Penda Mboko	50	35	7	43

Source: Field Work, 2015.

Empirical evidence reveals that the toilet facilities available to plantation worker leave very much to be desired. The residential areas are divided into camps and each of these camps has more than 50 homes. The toilet situation has really been very bad as the areas continue to use very dirty and poorly constructed as well as highly inadequate toilets (Figure 3). These toilets are exposed, some are without doors and a situation very much akin to the “tragedy of the Commons” operate here. That is, a common service which is available to all and owed by none is always misused and abused.



Figure 3. Abandoned Toilet in Ekona

The stench from these toilets bears eloquent testimony to the degree of exposure to sanitary related diseases. As a recent move, the CDC has constructed in each of these camps, a modern toilet facility. But this remains highly inadequate because just a single toilet to be assessed by more than 50 homes, it is clear that the level of filth or unsanitary conditions will continue to increase. The number of taps available in these camps is very insufficient. For instance, in Moli we Camp, there are just 5 stand taps for the whole of this camp. This means that people must cue up to carry water and spend long hours for this exercise. Thus confirming the fact that what is free is not free as such. Further worsening the water situation is the poor treatment of the water and the colour of the water at times is really bad. This gives room for the proliferation of water related diseases.

Though the company offers “free medication” to its workers, this cannot be a solution because as long as there are unsanitary conditions, due to poor toilets, water and waste disposal facilities as well as poor housing conditions, the cases of illnesses will continue to increase. Solutions to these problems should therefore target the root causes. More detailed discussions and observations also x-rayed the moral decadence of the CDC Camps. Sexual promiscuity has been reduced to a normal situation and people do not even complain. More than 50% of the girls therefore get pregnant in their teens.

Such a precarious situation is likely to expose them to a high incidence of HIV/AIDS at the camps. Infact, we could be tempted to describe these areas as “population in transit”. Transit because with such deteriorating situation and prevalence of these terminal ailments, more people will certainly give way in the nearest future if nothing is done. Campaigns have been made to sensitise and fight against HIV/AIDS and other STDs and diseases. But how effective can this be when poverty continues to hold people in this dragnet, making them vulnerable to diseases.

The wage/salary situation shows a marked contrast between the labourers and top managers. Some top managers receive salaries amounting to over 900.000FCFA as opposed to labourers who receive less than 60.000FCFA on average. Even with the poor salary situation, possibilities for loan are conspicuously absent. If there are loan facilities, it obtains mostly to the well paid senior staffs that eat the lion’s share of the company. As the CDC continues to spread its tentacles to areas like Illoani and Mbongo-Bamusso, it is necessary to identify these aspects and make them clearer so that the company can revisit its ideals on the purported development and create much more humane salary and working conditions for its workers who are actually dying in silence. Some long serving workers of the Corporation even believe that the era of white administration was much more appealing than what is obtained today. The solution to the precarious situation should be proffered in situ and it is incumbent of the powers that be to improve on the salaries/wage and working conditions of labourers. This will therefore make the company to deserve the “development” its name announces.

A company like the CDC should give room for people to go for further training and improve their categories. There is a training centre at Moliwe for that, but very few people are given the opportunity to go for such training. As a result, some workers spend more than 30 years in the company and are not given the opportunity for further training even once. The result is that people continue to stay on the

same category all through their service lifespan with no salary augmentation. This is very much common to those who toil day and night to ensure that latex flows from the rubber tree or oil palm is harvested and processed. This leaves them in a tight and frustrating corner and some resort to constant drinking, in a bid to postpone their problems. This therefore adds to the toll of the effects of the poverty entrapment already evident here.

There is a trade union which was created to protect and bargain for better wages/salaries and working conditions for the CDC workers. This trade union is supposed to channel workers' complaints to the appropriate quarters for conditions to be improved upon. Experience shows that the representatives of these unions have not been able to press for the change of working conditions because the situation is growing worse as the days go by. The representatives have stayed virtually mute. In this circumstance, we could only make an observation that somebody or group of people are either too comfortable or too insensitive to speak on behalf of the institutions they represent.

4. Conclusion

In the wake of the much heralded bridging the gap between the rich and poor on the planet today, it is important to remark that this philosophy needs to trickle down into the minds of policy makers and stakeholders in this sector so that the lives of the poor majority can be improved upon. It is therefore necessary to bridge the gap between the stinking rich (top cadres) and the precariously poor and vulnerable who seem to have been psychologically entrapped with little possibilities for their emancipation. It is necessary for the CDC to set aside a budget for real estate expansion to accommodate the increasing population of her workers and the necessary infrastructures. They should equally expand the number of toilets and organise clean up campaigns as regularly as possible. A new approach in income and social amenities distribution needs to be introduced into these plantations for it to judiciously earn the title of a "development corporation".

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