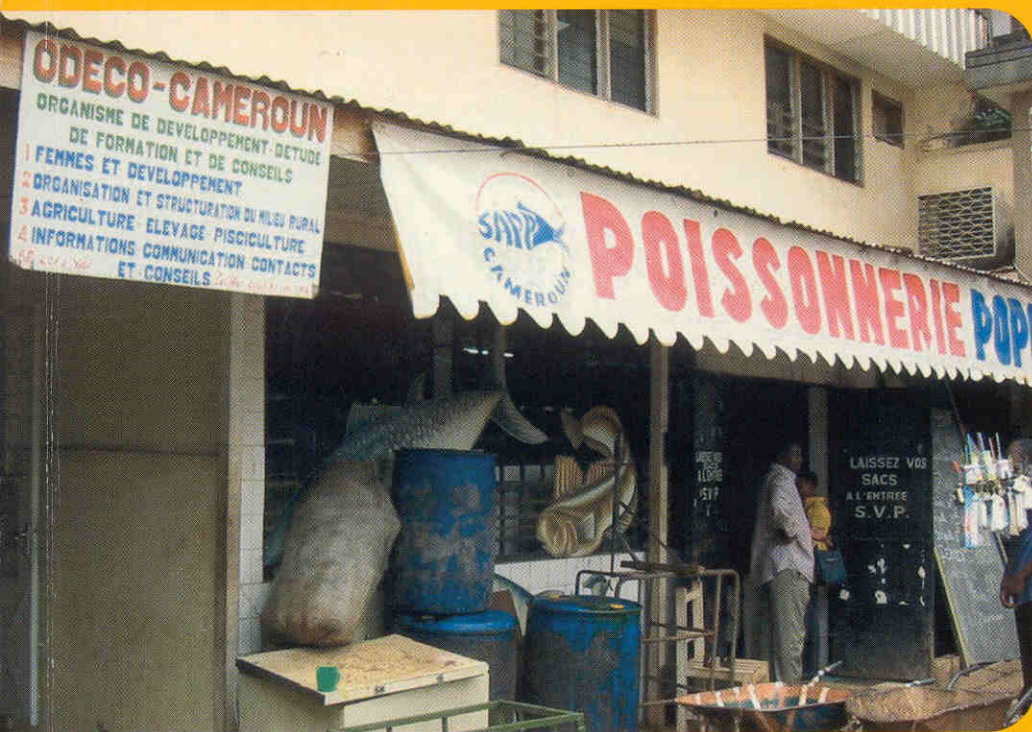


## Réorientation des prestations de services en milieu rural

Recommandations pour le choix et le suivi des organismes  
d'appui – Etude pilote au Cameroun



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## **SUMMARY**

### **1. Introduction**

Similar to many countries, the state in Cameroon has largely withdrawn from its acting role in the provision of services, relinquishing this sector to non-governmental actors. Furthermore, projects and programmes involving international cooperation have accelerated the process of externalising their project activities to local agencies. As a result of the vast number of organizations that emerged after the introduction of legislation on associations in 1990, these international projects were faced with the dilemma of selecting appropriate organizations to carry out their field activities.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) implement rural development projects in Cameroon. In view of the problems described above, this study contributes to the decision-making process of selecting local service provider organizations for future cooperation. The study should therefore:

- describe the current service provision landscape and typologize the analysed organizations,
- suggest a strategy for cooperation with service providers,
- elaborate a standard procedure to select organizations and monitor them during the course of the project, and
- elaborate a database that can retrieve the description and evaluation of individual service providers.

### **2. Methodology**

To achieve these results, numerous actors from the service sector were examined. Most of the data was collected from service providers, representing the supply side, and includes an analysis of their organizational strengths and weaknesses, as well as

their potential for future project cooperation. People in the rural areas as direct beneficiaries and international donors as contractors of service providers were explored from the service demand perspective. While the basic needs of the rural population were assessed in relation to support from service providers, international donors were questioned on their respective strategies and selection procedures with regard to service providers. Furthermore, all three acting levels were consulted about their current mutual cooperation experience and general demands on services of a high standard. Interviews with resource persons completed the data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 service provider organizations, with the population in seven villages of the Central and Eastern Province of the country and with seven international donor organizations. In the context of potential project cooperation, the data analysis carved out features that were common to all organizations, as well as characteristics that distinguished them from each other. In order to make recommendations for future selection processes and project cooperation, the assessment of strengths and weaknesses were matched with statements made by the rural population and international donors.

### **3. Actors in the Service Sector**

#### Donors

Donor agencies place very high expectations on service providers. Their main interest lies in successful project implementation, in other words achieving the overall intended impacts. As project activities are chiefly carried out by service provider organizations, project success heavily depends on the quality of the services provided. Donors are confronted with the problem of selecting service providers, as numerous inquiries for cooperation are constantly being placed. As yet, they do not dispose of standard selection proceedings. Moreover, past experience with service providers was not documented systematically, nor was information exchanged officially.

#### Rural population

Up to now, people in the rural areas have had both positive and negative experiences with service provider organizations. Since bad experience quickly leads to a general lack of confidence in service providers, careful selection is crucial to success at community level.

The ability of the rural population to choose their own service providers was investigated, and revealed an obvious discrepancy between people who had

experienced external support and those who had never benefited from these services. Whereas the former are well able to express the standard they expect from service providers, enumerating precise criteria, the latter note down vague ideas that tend to resemble a wish list.

#### Service provider organizations

Service provider organizations are themselves quite a heterogeneous group of actors and difficult to typologize in relation to potential project cooperation. Nevertheless, the following organization “types”, including their strengths and weaknesses, can be distinguished: private consulting firms, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and peasant associations. The NGO group can be subdivided into those that receive regular grants and those that do not. Apart from individual distinctions, the organizations also showed common features. All organizations provided evidence of weakness, particularly at the methodological and technical level. This is because the majority of providers design their activities to suit a vast market rather than their own abilities. Consequently, they offer a wide range of services for which most of them are insufficiently qualified.

It is not easy for donor agencies to estimate the quality of a service before it is actually carried out. This can be explained, first of all, by the huge number of service providers in operation and the wide range of services offered. Secondly, a final quality assessment is only possible via on-the-job observation of service providers. The selection procedure should therefore minimize the risk of contracting those that “perform badly”, without overstepping the project budget at the same time.

#### **4. General Recommendations**

Considerable potential is seen in holding official meetings with the different donors at regular intervals to exchange ideas. Here, experiences with local service providers could be discussed and made transparent. Installation of a common database is recommended in order to facilitate documentation.

Due to the poor performance of numerous service providers in Cameroon, a selection procedure before contracting is recommended. Since the rural population would be overtaxed with such a procedure at this point, it is recommended to leave service provider selection temporarily to the projects.

The low standard of services provided so far implies introducing intensive monitoring of service providing organizations. Due to limited personnel, logistic, and financial capacities, cooperation with only a limited number of service providers is

recommended.

Due to the methodological weakness of many service providers, inclusion of a budget to carry out further training in this field is recommended. Explicit training needs will emerge as a result of the monitoring process.

Due to institutional weaknesses, many organizations require counselling on internal organizational development. To ensure that this investment is worth the effort, only organizations that have proved reliable and used satisfactory working methods should benefit from this support.

## **5. Selection and Monitoring of Service Providers**

The basis for the proposed selection and monitoring procedure is a public invitation to tender for the award of project activities. The suggested procedure consists of several steps, in which general recommendations and project experience so far are considered. Hiring a service provider for a specific task depends entirely on the result of a step-by-step evaluation of the expression of interest and the technical and financial estimate. The monitoring phase begins once the contract has been signed. Standardized evaluation sheets have been worked out for each step in the process.

Preselection of service providers can take place following evaluation of the expression of interest. The most suitable organizations will be chosen with the help of criteria that refer to previous experience with the proposed team. This step reduces the number of potential candidates considerably

The selected organizations are required to submit their technical and financial estimates for the job. In a first step, the technical estimates are evaluated and ranked. The final decision is taken in a second step, on the basis of an assessment of the financial estimate.

All contracted organizations are integrated in the monitoring and evaluation system. It consists of various data collection elements and a workshop, during which the service provider and the donor exchange ideas and experience. The monitoring system as a whole allows the service provider to develop and enables the donor to observe the service provider's performance, on which future contracts depend. In addition, this system enables the donor to plan and monitor overall project activities to more advantage.

Information collected on individual organizations during the selection, monitoring, and evaluation processes is fed into a database. In the course of time, it will become a

key instrument in the selection process, as the number of high performance service providers for specific tasks increases. Conversely, the need for public invitations to tender in an attempt to find new organizations will decrease.

Over and above, projects can determine a quota for non-competitive service providers, such as, for example, young inexperienced or locally-based organizations. Both the criteria and the selection process must be adapted to suit this context; an in-depth analysis could be carried out with the help of a semi-structured interview before contracting.

## **6. "Service Provider" and "Partnership" - Difficult Expressions**

The terms « service provider » and « partnership » are being used more and more frequently in the context of international cooperation. As all parties under review tend to have a different understanding of these terms, it does not come as a surprise that careless use can lead to misunderstandings. We came to the conclusion that it is essential to define these terms and agree on their meaning in the interests of clarity and harmony in the relations between all parties.