

Saving Lives through Community Grain Banks in Extreme North Cameroon

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With a population of 3 111 792 people, the Extreme (Far) North Region of Cameroon is the most populated of the ten regions of the country. Though the most populated, this part of Cameroon is not favourable for agriculture as it is subjected to extreme dryness during the dry season and extreme floods during the rainy season. Thus, inhabitants of the region suffer from extreme hunger as a result of poor yields.

The region has eight months of extreme dryness and four months of extreme rain fall, says Kounai Robert, a youth animator in Mbiga-Zidim, a village in Mokolo subdivision of the Mayo Tsanaga Division of the Far North Region of Cameroon.

The four months of rain fall are characterized by floods as the region is surrounded by mountains that do not hold the rain, coupled with the fact that the whole region is a plain. The eight months of dry season our guide told us is characterized by extreme dryness.

The staple food of the entire Extreme (Far) North region of Cameroon is millet. This cereal is very scarce in some parts of the region due to pitiable yields.

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Serving food and saving lives

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Against the backdrop of persistent hunger in the Extreme North, the Network for the Fight Against Hunger in Cameroon; known in its French acronym as RELUFA kick started a program dubbed Community Grain Banks. Through the program, RELUFA has built some 42 community grain storage houses where food is stored. “When households run out of food, they come and borrow from the grain banks and repay in kind during harvest periods”, says Jaff Napoleon, anti hunger activist and Executive Secretary of RELUFA.

Since 2006 when the project started, over 450 bags (120KG) of millet have been distributed to over 42 villages in some three subdivision of the Region. The project has saved the hunger stricken region from the acute food shortage it experiences.



However, despite a Community Grain Banks project that makes cereals available to the population of this area, they still lack grinding mills, portable water, schools and health centers. In Mbozo-Kaé village which is found in the Meri sub division of the Diamare division, situated some 32KM away from Maroua, chief town of the region, the over 450 people of the village trek for 5KM to have drinking water during the dry season. They use a stones to grain RELUFA made available millet.

The acute problem of food insecurity in the Far North Region of Cameroon according to Sandrine Bikelle, Programs Assistant at RELUFA is caused by both natural and structural factors. Climatic conditions like continuous drought as well as floods are some of the natural factors that account for the poor yields and high rate of food insecurity in the Far North region of Cameroon. Thus, solving the problem requires a chain value. Mr Jaff argues that “management is outstanding”, therefore if the grain banks that are managed by officials chosen by the beneficiary villages are sustainably managed; it would save many more lives. Users of the Community Grain Banks on their part have lauded the non governmental organization for the live saving project.

Nonetheless, the project does not cover the entire region; it is carried out in just three of the six divisions of the region. Even in the divisions where the project is currently being implemented, the number of bags of millet donated by RELUFA is yet to feed everyone satisfactorily. Beneficiaries have complained that neighbouring villages where the project is not implemented usually come and borrow. The population thus expects RELUFA to extend the project to other divisions not yet benefitting, but the means at the disposal of the NGO, officials say do not permit them to do so. Besides, those benefitting already are requesting for grinding mills, portable water, schools and other social amenities.

The Network for the Fight Against Hunger and Poverty in Cameroon on her part during a visit to the project sites recently promised to channel some of their demands to their partners as well as the government of Cameroon. The Community Grain Banks project is being implemented with support from the Japanese government through its embassy in Cameroon.

The success of this project has proven that lives can be saved by saving food and the NGO has encouraged beneficiaries to borrow and pay wisely. It intends to increase the number of bags of millet per store and extend to other villages provided it has the funds.

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