

Findings



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Village Immersion : Mandaka, Cameroon

During the period May 19-31, 1997, three Bank staff, Connie Luff (AFC07), Philippe Callier (AFTM3), and Mark Blackden (AFT11), took part in a village immersion program. They stayed for two weeks in the village of Mandaka, Far North Province of Cameroon, about 80 km to the west of the Provincial capital of Maroua. The program was launched at the initiative of Nicholas Bennett, Senior Education Planner at the Bank's Resident Mission in Yaoundé. It was prepared and organized by CARE Cameroon, an international NGO with more than 18 years experience in the country, and which has undertaken many projects in the Far North Province.

The Setting

The village of Mandaka is about 8 km on the dirt track to the north of the small town of Mokolo, Far North Province of Cameroon (*Box 1*). It is a region close to the Mandara mountain range that separates Cameroon from Nigeria. The hills are sparse and rugged, strewn with boulders, and are sometimes quite steep. Terraces of stones built by farmers wind along the contours of the hillsides to protect the topsoil and improve water retention.

Extended families live in compounds which are a cleverly arranged cluster of round mud huts, each serving a special purpose: one for the husband, one for each wife and their children, and separate huts for goats, sheep, cattle, grain storage, and cooking. Compounds are dispersed all over the village, with cultivated plots generally close by.

Box 1: Why Mandaka?

The village was selected by CARE principally because it had an adequate potable water supply, and each selected family had at least one member living in the compound who could speak French.

Water is the lifeblood of the community in two critical respects. First, access to sufficient potable water, and to adequate, timely rainfall, is the critical to survival. Second, the need to tackle the overriding water problem has brought the community together and energized its members. With support from CARE Cameroon, the 500 villagers in the *Chechem* district dug 2 wells, organized a water management committee, and each family pays 3 cups of millet annually to finance maintenance and repairs.

Mandaka's 5,000 inhabitants are subsistence farmers, producing food for their own needs, and modest quantities of crops for cash, mainly white beans, groundnuts, and cotton. They have tackled their potable water needs, but adequate rainfall is entirely beyond their control.

Principal Constraints in Mandaka Village

Rainfall in this region is exceptionally variable and haphazard, both spatially and temporally (*Box 2*). If the rains do not come at the right time, or are insufficient in any one place, the result is drought, even when total rainfall is above average. This year, the rains began well in late April but then became more unpredictable. With the good early rain, the villagers planted their precious savings of last year's seeds, and hoped that the rains would continue. This year at least, rains have been adequate and drought averted.

Box 2: Variable Rainfall

Data for the Mokolo area vividly illustrate the precarious rainfall situation. In 1985, there was a difference of nearly 380 mm of rainfall (about one-third of the average annual total) between two points only 12 km apart. Mokolo's total annual rainfall has varied from a low of 700 mm to a high of more than 1,400 mm. It's hard to build development strategies, let alone contemplate innovation and risk-taking, in the face of such wildly shifting parameters.

There is no *public transport* in the region, and the people of Mandaka inhabit a walking world (*Box 3*). We accompanied them as they walked long distances to schools, markets, health facilities, and to the nearest town. The road to Mokolo is bad, discouraging traders and raising their costs. We discovered for ourselves what the residents of Mandaka know only too well: the critical tasks of getting people and goods around absorb excessive amounts of time and energy, and their access to even the most basic forms of transport technology is extremely limited.

Box 3: Means of Transport

An informal survey of Mandaka's transport resources revealed a village poorly endowed with in this respect: no vehicles, 5 bicycles (all broken), 1 push cart (also broken), 4 pairs of oxen, and 5 donkeys. The oxen and donkeys are reserved for ploughing, and are not used much for transporting goods or people.

Mandaka does not have a *health post*, and the nearest facilities are the public hospital in Mokolo

(8 km) and an Evangelical health center in Soulédé (12 km). Inadequate access to health care is a major preoccupation for the village, especially as health status can change very rapidly (*Box 4*). Three schools of markedly variable quality and accessibility serve the larger community.

Box 4: Sickness and Health: A Precarious Balance

Three-year old Jacanoa got sick alarmingly quickly, and was transformed overnight from a lively little boy into one nearing death from dehydration. At midnight, Connie was woken up by her hosts and asked if she had any medicines. In the morning, we pooled all the oral rehydration salts we had brought with us. Jacanoa improved visibly, though was sick again the next day, and had to be carried on his mother's back to the Soulédé health center for treatment. By the end of our stay, he was back in good health.

Key Findings

- The *community actively shunned public services*, a finding that confirmed the results of the 1994 Participatory Poverty Assessment (see references at end of article). Residents of Mandaka say they prefer to go to the Evangelical Mission health center in Soulédé, which is 1.5 times further than the public district hospital in Mokolo, and where they have to pay more for services. They prefer it because they are courteously received, and will actually get the treatment and medicines they need.
- Similarly, the *least popular school choice was the Mandaka public school*. Though the buildings were impressive in comparison with the parents' association school, the teachers were not motivated, 2 of the 4 did not speak Mafa, the local language, and there were only 5 textbooks for the entire school. The principal admitted that the planting season was too busy a time for children to be in school, but schools are not free to set the calendar to accommodate peak labor demand. A number of the children go to the private mission school in Udkia, even though it is furthest away (1 1/4 hr walk) and the most expensive in the area. Here, teachers could communicate well with the children, as all but one spoke Mafa, and there was 1 textbook to share among 2 children.
- *Community spirit and strong organization* in Mandaka. The community was proud of having organized itself, and launched water projects, before CARE Cameroon came to support them. There were 3 main groups (elders, youth, and women's groups) engaged in village development projects. A village development committee brought together representatives of each of these groups for community-level projects.
- The *villagers know what they want*, understand well their resource limitations, have clearly defined priorities, and are willing to work hard and pool efforts for what they want to do. Their great success with the water project has encouraged them, and they are now keen to pursue other priorities. They desperately want to bring a health center to the village, and to set up a small shop, so that people do not have to walk as frequently to Mokolo. The women's groups want to buy a mill for grinding their millet and maize, thus saving them around 3 hours every day. The youth group, in addition to putting in place a

mechanism of mutual support with school fees, also wanted more opportunities for socializing. The committee is keen to have a school that is close, as children now cannot start going to school until they are about 8--before that age the distance to school is simply too great. The committee has supported sending a woman student to Maroua for teacher training.

- Even with good organization, a dynamic and determined community, and appropriate technical support, *luck is still a critical ingredient* in meeting water needs. The neighboring community of Biscavai was less fortunate than Mandaka. The 5 wells they have painstakingly dug since 1988, one of them 23 meters deep, have all come up dry, and their potable water needs are as acute as ever.
- Mandaka is a very small economy with *little scope for specialization* within the village. There are small-scale transactions within the community: farmers can either rent land from better-endowed neighbors or work on others' land for a wage. Many women produce *bil-bil*, a local alcoholic beverage derived from millet and sold at the weekly markets on Thursday and Saturday nights. The only specialized skills are those of the blacksmith families, who are also potters, and those of older women who weave beautiful baskets for family use. Obstacles to the diversification of skills within the village are the small size of the community (about 50 families), and the fact that people are risk-averse since life in Mandaka is precarious.
- *The women are always working, and their time constraint is severe.* This clearly has a seasonal dimension. At the busy time of planting, the women usually need to walk the 8 km to Mokolo (where the nearest powered mill operates) every 3 days to grind their millet. In the rainy season, the walk is too difficult, and there is too much work to do. Consequently, the women get up at 1 a.m., work until 5 a.m. grinding the millet with a stone, leave to work in the fields all day, returning only at 6 p.m. to prepare the evening meal for the men and to rest after washing the dishes. Fetching firewood is also more time-consuming than ever, as population pressure on land and increasing drought take their toll. Some have started to use improved stoves. Families are already limited to gathering fuelwood from their own plots of land, and have, as a result, started to replant a few trees on individual fields. This may well prove to be a creative way of encouraging replanting, and is likely to work better than community-level projects. But there is still little general awareness of what we see as an impending fuelwood crisis in this area.

The program brought us closer to our clients and their problems, and gave us insight, through shared experience, into their constraints and coping mechanisms. It also helped to foster partnership with CARE Cameroon, and to demystify the Bank a little in the process.

For further information on Cameroon and this region, please see: Jan Hijkoop, Mahamat Abadan, Hama Hadama Bello, *Les Monts Mandara: Les Hommes et l'Environnement et les Expériences du Projet Agroforestier*. Projet Agroforesterie Villageoise, ONADEF/CARE Mokolo, Mars 1992. *Cameroon: Diversity, Growth, and Poverty Reduction*, Report No. 13167-CM, World Bank, April 1995. Cécile Séverin Abega et al., *Evaluation Participative de la Pauvreté, Etude menée dans la Province de l'Extrême Nord*, Mars-Juin 1994. For copies, please contact Mark Blackden, Rm. J2-123, World Bank, 1818 H Street NW, Washington, D.C. 20433. Tel. no.: (202) 473-7555 ; e-mail address: Mblackden@worldbank.org