

Farming dynamics

Realising the value of information in agriculture, the challenge taken up by Cameroonian periodicals *La Voix Du Paysan* (LVDP) and *The Farmers' Voice* (TFV)

The birth of a periodical

Involving an NGO

Profitability and Rural Development, a difficult balancing act

Is rural poverty the only impediment?

Conclusion



In rural areas, where kiosks are rare and purchasing power is limited, sales focus on subscriptions.

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In the best case scenario, Cameroonian farmers can rely on local government services and those from private organisations for information to help them better develop their activities and improve the lives of their families. In practice, few agricultural organisations in Cameroon benefit from information support. Yet, like any other economic actors, farmers as a group need guidance and advice to increase business revenues. They must constantly adapt to challenging agro-ecological conditions, reduce their dependence on the weather and find technical and financial resources that suit their activity. Likewise, as citizens, rural residents are entitled to be kept up to date about the economic, social, political

or cultural context in which they operate. But the mainstream media targets a mainly urban market and struggles to cover rural concerns. Fostering the intellectual development of people by other means makes sense. The rural world is interested not only in agricultural technique topics, but also in more complex topics such as biotechnology, climate change and agricultural policies. All these issues have to be covered by qualified persons who are able to convey meaningful messages to a public with limited formal education. This is the challenge which the LVDP and TFV periodicals strive to meet.

The birth of a periodical

«La Voix Du Paysan» [The Farmer's Voice] was launched in 1988. The title only existed in French at the time, with the by-line «Review of local development initiatives». The periodical's founders are a group of farmers from various farmers' organizations (FOs) from Cameroon's ten provinces. They were the periodical's first editorial board. The periodical was intended as a news organization, and as a place for farmers to share their experiences, having found themselves without state support as a result of the economic crisis of the late 1980s and the imposition of structural adjustment policies. The non-governmental organisation SAILD (Support Service for Local Development Initiatives) then provided the board with a qualified person to advise on editorial, who ended up running the paper. Soon SAILD realised that to interest their farmer audience, the content of this periodical should focus on agricultural production problems and the technical solutions to these.

Despite this step in the right direction, the periodical struggled to build up a readership. The price of the periodical (400 CFA francs for a quarterly publication) was prohibitive and its marketing strategy nonexistent. Because of its magazine format, the periodical could not be displayed on the front stand in kiosks along with the tabloid format publications.

Farmers' organizations, the target audience of the time, were at an embryonic stage. In 1993, the periodical changed to a tabloid format in order to match other local media which were more visible in kiosks. First it became a «bi-

monthly publication for rural news and discussion,» then a «monthly publication for rural news, training and discussion». Since 2008 and its 20th anniversary, LVDP has been a «monthly publication for the rural entrepreneur». Since that time, the periodical has been a source of free support and advice for farmers.

In 1996, an English version of the periodical was launched called «La Voix du Paysan – English», which became «The Farmer's Voice» (TFV). The English version is not a translation of the contents of LVDP. Its target is the English-speaking community, and deals with issues specific to the two English-speaking regions of the country, namely the South-West and North-West.

Accordingly, LVDP and TFV have two separate editorial teams led by trained journalists. Their primary purpose is to provide information which meets a need and so fulfil the social mission of making quality information available to economic actors in rural areas. The periodical is subsidised and distributed all over Cameroon. In rural areas mainly, it is distributed on a subscription basis at preferential prices.

The farmers' voice

The *leitmotiv* of the periodicals can be summed up in a few words: listen to the readers. LVDP and TFV aim to echo the concerns of rural people and provide them with useful information. Sections such as «Readers' letters» give the readership a voice and ad hoc surveys are conducted to guide editors and inform editorials. The «Health» section has proved very popular with the public, so the publication has developed a range of information on nutrition and disease prevention.

Readers' increased interest in the economics of their farming activities led the periodical to adopt the by-line «Monthly publication of the rural entrepreneur», in January 2008. Much more attention is now paid to the profitability of products.

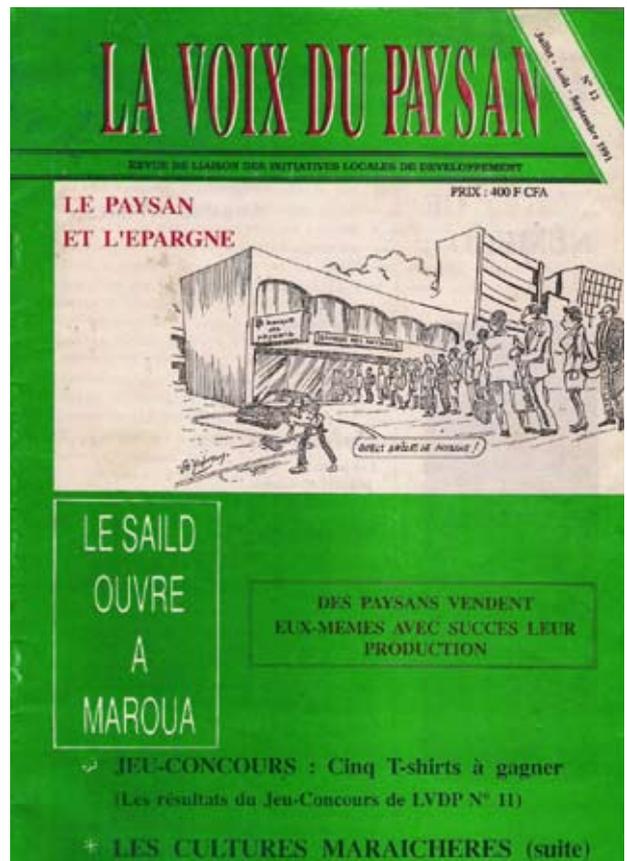
One of the periodicals' undeniable strengths is the imagination and innovation they have displayed in remaining faithful to the concerns of their audiences, despite limited financial and human resources.



The publication has developed a range of information on nutrition and disease prevention.



Two covers from the beginning of La Voix du Paysan.



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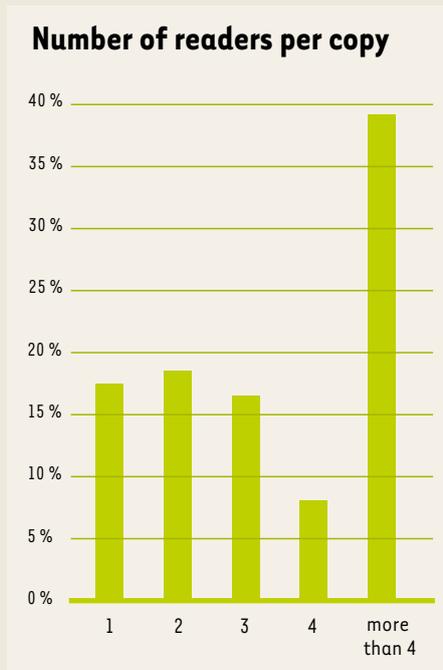
The difficulty funding the press

Worldwide and in Cameroon in particular, financing the press is difficult. Editors have derisory means at their disposal, such that they are unable to guarantee their employees are remunerated. The remuneration of private journalists is closely linked to the production of articles. Most are paid the same rate as freelancers. Sponsors are extremely rare. Financial constraints have led some Cameroonian media to compromises, which jeopardise the independence of the press. Around the world, political and financial interests weigh on the media. Cameroon is no exception, not by a long measure. One alternative way to reduce this risk is possibly through subsidies. This type of financial support to the press stems from a policy choice and significant backing from the State and / or donors. In a country ranked 156th out of 186 in the Human Development Index¹, support for

1 : <http://www.populationdata.net/index2.php?option=pays&pid=38&nom=cameroun>

private The leitmotiv of the periodicals can be summed up in a few words: listen to the readers. LVDP and TFV aim to echo the concerns of rural people and provide them with useful information. Sections such as «Readers' letters» give the readership a voice and ad hoc surveys are conducted to guide editors and inform editorials. The «Health» section has proved very popular with the public, so the publication has developed a range of information on nutrition and disease prevention. Readers' increased interest in the economics of their farming activities led the periodical to adopt the by-line «Monthly publication of the rural entrepreneur», in January 2008. Much more attention is now paid to the profitability of products. One of the periodicals' undeniable strengths is the imagination and innovation they have displayed in remaining faithful to the concerns of their audiences, despite limited financial and human resources. media by the state has been initiated in recent years, but it is still selective support and derisory amounts. For example, the annual amount allocated to a periodical does not cover the cost of one edition's print run. As a result, some periodicals do not even apply for this grant as the amount on offer does not justify the drawn out administrative work involved.

LVDP and TFV front pages



Teams The two versions (French and English) are run by four journalists (each team has an editorial head) and 8 employees who distribute the periodicals. SAILD provides LVDP and TFV with an accountant and financial manager.

Aims Disseminate and so democratize access to information
Participate in economic, social and cultural development
Influence policy

Editorial line apolitical and nondenominational

Types of information disseminated Fact sheets on agricultural crops
Health and nutrition advice
Training course opportunities and advice for young people who want to start in agriculture
Readers' letters
Market prices
The news from rural areas (agriculture angle, food sovereignty)

Circulation 7500 copies (LVDP), 2000 copies (TFV)

Composition of the readership Farmers' organisations
Farmers
Development actors
Agricultural training centres
Rural literacy centres
State technical service staff (ministries, municipalities)
Policy makers and local elites

Subscribers 5500 (LVDP), 500 (TFV).

Involving an NGO

SAILD, the support NGO, offers several technical services. LVDP and TFV try to make the most of the possible synergies between them and the NGO. LVDP and TFV have ridden out the institutional crises which the parent NGO has experienced and stayed the course over the years.

Among the services offered by SAILD, who maintain close relations with the periodicals, is the Documentation Centre for Rural Development (DCRD). The latter has a library, a website and a telephone and email service, called «Hello Engineer» to address the issues of rural entrepreneurs. The DCRD helps with the periodical's distribution (subscriptions and direct sales), the «Hello Engineer» service brings a level of expertise to the responses given in the «Readers' letters» section, the themes covered in training / awareness days organised by the DCRD are identified largely on the basis of requests received by LVDP and TFV journalists, and so on. So there are numerous collaborations that enhance both SAILD and the periodicals.

This complementarity requires a minimum of coordination. This role is taken on by the NGO that organises framework consultations every two months. The extent to which there is coordination is questionable, however, given that entities such as DCRD or LVDP and TFV enjoy a certain autonomy. The LVDP, originally conceived as a newsletter, has become a real newspaper.

LVDP and TFV occupy space at the parent NGO's premises yet are managed quasi-independently.

If belonging to the NGO has benefits for the periodicals (complementarity of services, economies of scale, etc.), it also raises the question of their editorial independence in relation to the NGO's strategic vision. Up to the present time, the NGO has had the courage, through LVDP and TFV, to deliver strong political messages challenging the agricultural and trade policies of Cameroon and other nations.

In a country where press freedom is the subject of debate and rural citizens are ill-informed, the periodicals' «advocacy» role makes complete sense and deserves to be acclaimed given the risks incurred.



The ability of the periodicals to generate their own resources is limited.



Testimonials from readers

Apollinaire ENDAMENA, a breeder on the outskirts of Yaoundé: «Attracted by the title *Le porc rapporte gros* [«Pigs bring in the bacon»], I became a pig breeder.»

Pierre Jacquard EVINA, a veterinary nurse in Lomié (East Region) «I discovered it in the hands of a farmer whom I was visiting in 1989. It has become a training tool.»

André Marie MBA, a farmer in Edéa (Littoral Region): «When I talk about agriculture, I am told that I should be an agronomist. People do not realise that my source of inspiration is LVDP.»

Ernest LOMBO, a farmer in Lolodorf (South Region): «It is by reading LVDP that I learned how to go back to the village and run small agricultural projects.»

Profitability and rural development, a difficult balancing act

With the support of technical and financial partners they found through SAILD, LVDP and TFV had a relatively stable upbringing in this complex context. The periodicals experienced serious financial difficulties as endowments declined. From 2007, with their survival threatened, they were forced to adopt more explicitly commercial practices. LVDP and TFV drew up an action plan in order to reduce expenses and increase revenues. In times of budget cuts, as in many companies, the first variable recommended for adjustment is the reduction of wage costs. The periodicals have almost halved their workforce (editors and distributors). Other roles have also seen cuts (distribution production costs, etc.). But taking action with regard to costs they do not directly control has proven to be more complicated. The expenditure arising from the production, distribution (remoteness of certain areas) and the target audience (low income) is large and not easily squeezed. Furthermore, the ability of the periodicals to generate their own resources is limited. Since inception,

the production cost of the periodicals has progressed to 516 FCFA (0.78 EUR) and 1211 FCFA (1.83 EUR) per copy, respectively, for LVDP and TFV. There has been no impact on the periodicals' selling price which has remained unchanged for ten years. They are currently sold at the cover price of 300 FCFA (0.46 Eur), which does not allow the periodicals to cover its expenses.

Traditionally, the agricultural press is neglected by advertising. Interest from advertisers for a periodical on rural issues is weak, while its social concerns and periodicity close the door to a whole range of advertisers. In addition, the periodicals will not accept certain lucrative advertising (tobacco, gambling, etc.).

Finally, monthly editions do not lend themselves to short-term advertising campaigns. For all these reasons, the periodicals generate little advertising revenue and cannot rely on readers to bear their costs. The challenge remains, of targeting rural audiences, who are «expensive» by definition, with limited resources.

Distributing LVDP and TFV:

The titles are distributed in two ways:

- ☛ Direct-sales through kiosks or by street hawkers in urban areas primarily
- ☛ Subscriptions are mainly targeted at rural readers.

In rural areas, kiosks are rare and purchasing power is low, selling subscriptions (which are cheaper) is given priority. This is the most common mode of distribution for the periodicals for the Anglophone version. Direct sales are mainly amongst urban and suburban populations. The French version has seen an increase in direct sales and this mode of distribution reflects LVDP setting new targets. To cope with its economic constraints, the LVDP is reaching out to wealthier audiences, while trying not to neglect the rural sphere. The editorial staff is aware that the economic tradeoffs may divert it from its initial mission of bringing information to remote rural areas. But it is not obvious to the periodicals what the right balance is between the economic and social approaches that characterise them.

When the economic logic is put forward, it often takes precedence over the social. This raises the question of the future of the fundamental mission of the periodicals.

Is rural poverty the only impediment?

In rural areas, the distribution of the periodicals for free or at a token price has been severely curtailed since the periodicals have sought to increase revenues.

Farmers have been encouraged to purchase the periodical through discounted or subsidised subscription offers. The strategy has met with a certain lack of enthusiasm that is undoubtedly explained by the limited purchasing power of the target audience. Starting from the premise that the periodical is a source of relevant and useful information to farmers², the reasons for this lack of enthusiasm deserve further study. The price of the periodicals can be prohibitive for half of the rural Cameroonian population, who live below the poverty line and earn only 232,547 FCFA (354.55 EUR) per adult per year, or 637 FCFA (0.97 EUR) per day³. Of these, over seven out of ten people live in farmers' households (farming, fishing, breeding and hunting). Given these conditions, the subscription price of 250 FCFA⁴ (0.38 EUR), albeit a reduced rate, appears to be an obstacle. The periodicals' difficulty in penetrating the rural readership cannot however simply be attributed to poverty.

In Cameroon, although rural populations have a higher level of education compared to other countries in Africa, 47.5% of the poor have never enrolled at school. A reading culture is virtually nonexistent. That a literate farmer is willing to read a periodical that he or she receives for free and reads it (alone or in groups) because they are convinced of the usefulness of its contents is one thing, however, to go as far as paying for the periodical requires other motivations. Would a head of a family include the purchase of a periodical in the household budget? This is not a common practice, and for rural people who are literate to turn more readily to this type of information, presupposes that the periodical is accessible in terms of price and availability, but also that the reflex of acquiring information through reading be rooted in attitudes.

It is not obvious to the periodicals what the right balance is between the economic and social approaches that characterise them.

2: See the findings of both assessments.

3: <http://www.statisticscameroon.org/fr/images/stories/Documents/Ecam2011/Profil%20of%20en%20pauvrete%20milieu%20rural.pdf>

4: Per copy subscription price.



LVDP and TFV take part in agricultural events to market themselves.

© LVDP.

How does one make the quest for knowledge blossom within rural communities? The discussions on the prerequisites and how to bring this culture of reading to villages raises not only questions of responsibility (state, NGOs, etc.) but also of funding.

Conclusion

LVDP and TFV have pursued their social mission vis-à-vis rural populations for years thanks to the support of technical and financial partners. Convinced of the relevance of the periodical for rural development, these partners have long questioned the periodicals about their sustainability without a major emphasis on profitability. Much of the media is subsidised, and without subsidies, no news periodical would survive. Why, in this global context, should LVDP and TFV be the exception? Especially since the ambitious challenge to provide quality information in a periodical with limited circulation and costly distribution requires certain means.

To reduce distribution costs, LVDP and TFV have relied on FOs, offering their members bulk purchases or subscriptions. Should more strategic partnerships with FOs not be stepped up to mitigate the perennial problems of distribution? Solutions to reduce costs can be envisaged but a news periodical is still a costly enterprise. Today, development assistance is increasingly being shaped by the market economy and donors have some reservations about supporting initiatives with hypo-

thetical long-term returns. LVDP and TFV have evolved with the times and, while retaining their paper versions, they have adopted NICT⁵, which are cheaper and more attractive in the eyes of donors. With their websites⁶, LVDP and TFV reach a different audience, mainly urban and peri-urban populations hit by the food crisis of 2008 who have started farming. The periodicals have adapted to demand since their inception. LVDP and TFV have certainly shown themselves able to modernize while preserving the strong desire to remain faithful to their original mission. Economic logic has forced them to turn to other targets, without alienating rural audiences... but for how long?

Will the technological leap witnessed in rural areas with the rapid emergence of mobile phones be identical to the experience of the internet? Nothing is less certain. Will LVDP and TFV find the right balance between grants and its own revenue? How do they attract the interest of donors and other economic actors to promote rural information?

Rural populations have significant demographic and economic weight in Africa; they play a major role in the development of their countries. To be agents of their own development, rural people must decide for themselves and have the ability to see the challenges and opportunities before them. Access to information is paramount, and this inevitably has a cost.


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This issue of Farming Dynamics was produced by Aude Ehlinger, Partnerships Manager for SOS Faim in Cameroon, together with Marie-Pauline Voufo, editor in chief of La Voix du Paysan and Martin Nzegang, technical advisor to the president of SAILD.

⁵: New information and communication technologies.

⁶: Websites: www.lavoixdupaysan.org, www.thefarmersvoice.org

SOS Faim and the farmers' organisations

For several years, SOS Faim supports different farmers' organisations in Africa and Latin America. SOS Faim publishes *Farming Dynamics* which deals with the challenges faced by agricultural producers' and farmers' organisations in their development.

This publication is available for download in French, English and Spanish on SOS Faim's website: www.sosfaim.org.

Apart from *Farming Dynamics*, SOS Faim publishes another newsletter, **Zoom microfinance**: as with all development tools, we have to analyse the aims, models and implementation conditions of aid to microfinance institutions. It is with this purpose in mind that Sos Faim publishes *Zoom microfinance*.

This publication is also available for download in French, English and Spanish SOS Faim's website: www.sosfaim.org.

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The last issues of «Farming Dynamics» have dealt with the following topics:

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The development of the potato production chain in the Sahel Belt

n° 20

Mali – Office du Niger Can the farmers' movement push back agribusiness?

n° 19

A local dynamic is created around cereal banks: the case of «Facilitaors for Change Ethiopia» (FCE) in Oromia region

n° 18

Capitalising on a Process of Institutional Evolution in a Farmer's Organization (FO)

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Agricultural Interprofessional Organisations (IPO) in West Africa

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Traditional rural handicrafts in Bolivia: A developing sector

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An approach for local development: territorial regeneration