



„Life done Boom!“
Food and Farming in Cameroon

Hannah Schmitt

Projektnummer: C300105418

Projekttitel: Organic vegetable cultivation for poverty alleviation and improved nutrition health

Bei **FORUDEF** (Food and Rural Development Foundation) in Buea, Kamerun

Zusammenfassung

Unser ASA-Praktikum fand in Buea statt, einer Stadt am Fuß des Vulkans „Mount Cameroon“ im Südwesten Kameruns.

Die Kameruner sind sehr gastfreundlich und offen gegenüber neuen Ideen. Während der Zeit des Praktikums fanden die Präsidentschaftswahlen statt. Kaum einer zweifelte an, dass die Wahlergebnisse gefälscht wurden. Die meisten Menschen in Kamerun akzeptieren die Machtspielereien um in Frieden zu bleiben. Korruption ist überall spürbar im täglichen Leben. Ein ökologisches Bewusstsein ist so gut wie nicht vorhanden.

Die Praktikantinnen Mirjam Jann und Hannah Schmitt haben zusammen mit der **Organisation FORUDEF** (Food and Rural Development Foundation) im Bereich der Ernährung und nachhaltigen Landwirtschaft gearbeitet. Die Arbeit konzentrierte sich auf die Zusammenarbeit mit verschiedenen Gruppen in Dörfern in der Nähe von Buea. Im **Ernährungs-Programm**, genannt “Feed Well, Feed Right, FeelHealthy”, tauschten die Praktikanten mit den teilnehmenden Gruppenmitgliedern Ansätze und Theorien aus wie man sich ausgewogen ernährt. In weiteren Schritten führten sie Koch-Praxis durch und begleiteten den Anbau von Nahrungsmitteln auf den Feldern. In einem zusätzlichen Training lernten die Gruppen über die schädlichen Auswirkungen von Chemikalien (Spritz – und Düngemittel), wie man sich richtig schützt und fanden alternative Anbaumethoden (z.B. Bio-Landbau).

Während der Zeit des Praktikums nahmen vier Gruppen regelmäßig an den Schulungen teil. Sie waren offen, Gewohnheiten zu ändern und neue Techniken anzuwenden. Einige Mitglieder der Gruppen bemerkten bereits Verbesserungen in der Gesundheit und waren zufrieden mit dem Wachstum ihrer Kulturen (z.B. Erdnüsse und Blattgemüse) auf dem Feld. Weitere Gruppen aus der Umgebung sind interessiert an den Schulungen. Das Pilotprojekt ist erfolgreich und FORUDEF führt weiterhin Trainings durch, vor allem in der sehr abgelegenen Akwaya Region. Außerdem wurde unter den Teilnehmern und den FORUDEF-Mitarbeitern ein Bewusstsein für die Probleme und Alternativen von Spritzmitteln geschaffen.

Die Zeit in Kamerun war eine aufregende und bereichernde Erfahrung für die ASA Teilnehmerinnen, die sie als Team gut meisterten und genossen.

Wow, Cameroon is so different!

The first impression of Douala, Cameroons economical capital shocked me a bit. What I saw through the windows of the Taxi on the first night reminded me on Slums from documentaries I've seen. Tin shacks, dirt roads, loud music everywhere, crowded streets, open fireplaces and crazy traffic with dark motorbikes and people on the streets between speeding cars.

Rough but Hearty

But very soon I noticed that Cameroon is a very friendly country. Buea, the city where we lived and worked in was much smaller and much more relaxed than Douala. People there were very welcoming and interested in us, which impressed us very much. I experienced Cameroonians as open minded, extroverted, spirited and loud but really likeable people. Also conditioned by the Pidgin English, the simplified English dialect spoken in the South West Region and North West Region of Cameroon, the conversation form seemed to be very rough but hearty. On the streets, in shops and Taxis many people appreciated us and were interested in what we did. Many wanted to be our friends, which was even inconvenient for us. We were a focus of attention for the locals, which could be exhausting, even though it was almost only positive attention. I had difficulties to get a closer relationship to a Cameroonian, as I blocked all of these advances.

The social system in Cameroon is very different from what I was used to. The family circle is much wider, closer and more important there than I ever experienced it before. Possessions as money, houses or food were exchanged freely within these family systems, but also ideal values as support, child upbringing or businesses. Therefore the relationship to one partner was not as important, close and trustful as I knew it from my culture. Child education included a lot of pressure, violence and threats, but not a lot of mutual comprehension.

Much Creativity and Many Makeshifts

It was rainy season while we were there. It was raining every day until the end of September, and occasionally but very strong from then on. As Buea is located on the foot of Mount Cameroon in approximately 1000 m height the temperature was rather chilly.

The standard of living was of course much lower than what we were used to. There was no constant water and electricity in the whole town. We had regularly running water every second day, and power blackouts every once in a while. The only public transport were overcrowded small Taxis. Roads, buildings, vehicles and other installations as water and electricity seemed to be makeshift and suffered from the harsh climatic conditions. People proved much creativity with improvising and repairing stuff without appropriate material, but the quality definitely suffered from that. Pests as ants, cockroaches, mice and fungi were omnipresent in our environment, our rooms and our food.

Slight Tensions

Paul Biya is president of Cameroon since 30 years. The government is highly corrupt, corruption is even institutionalized by the law. There are really poor, remote areas in the country and the infrastructure is bad. The police fails to treat criminals, so there is a high level of generally accepted self-justice, especially in rural areas. Information flow within the country resembles a rumor mill. The level of knowledge and education is, as I found, very low. Maybe because of that many people are very interested in new knowledge, but are also very uncritical and credulous. Witchcraft and absolute Christianity are ubiquitous in parallel and generally undoubted.

During our stay there were elections. Nobody really expected the elections to be fair, nor to change anything. Most people wanted peace in their country, so the public aversions against Biya were very low. Still the atmosphere before and after the election were tense. People were careful and gendarme presence increased. As information flow within the country was really poor, it was hard to tell what really happened. There were some small disturbances, but in general it was peaceful.

The economy was mainly based on agriculture, as the land is very fertile, and on foreign investors. Many Cameroonians have little land where they grow some food, and have mini-businesses as selling some food on the streets or small businesses as shops or restaurants. The little industry in the country is owned by foreign investors. Cameroonians say that it's nearly impossible for a domestic businessman to give sufficient bribe money to the government to start a big business.

Happy People?

We arranged very well with this situation, as people did living there. It would be a lie to claim, that people there were so satisfied with their lives. Some were more, some less. Many were angry about the failure of the government, about bad job opportunities and bad payment. Many dreamed to escape, and make a better living in the western world, which they knew from TV and friends or relatives who made it, especially younger people. Others dreamed of opening a restaurant or a charity organization to improve the situation in the country. I guess people had an overall level of satisfaction as we do in Germany, just the things they complained about were different.

FORUDEF

FORUDEF (Food and Rural Development Foundation) is a small Organization based in Buea. It focuses its investments on the people in the remote Akwaya sub-division. The goal of FORUDEF is to build capacity at the village level to increase community access to resources and participation in the sustainable management of natural resources, community health and livelihood improvement, and to experience greater benefits in standard of living as a result. Its interventions are in Community Health, Beekeeping, Micro-Finance, Natural Resource Management, Sustainable Agriculture and Economic Development. (www.forudef.com)

Feed Well, Feed Right, Feel Healthy

We were supervised by Susan Tabe, the wife of Moses Tabe, founder and Executive Director of FORUDEF. The cooperation was great personally and relating to work. She accompanied us everywhere, arranged everything, contacted the groups and translated if necessary English to Pidgin English. We were the ones carrying out the trainings and were able to plan our time, tell FORUDEF what we want to work on and to improve the Program we were working on.

We were responsible for a Nutrition Program called “Feed Well, Feed Right, Feel Healthy”. It aims to improve community health standards by addressing nutritional deficiencies. This will include both theoretical and practical components, as well as access to a seed bank so that participants can grow crops rich in nutrients currently lacking in their diets. It will empower women primarily, who will then use the information to help their families. (<https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/nutrition/>)

The program was set up by two Canadian volunteers who stayed with FORUDEF before we arrived. It was well planned and organized, so that we could start right away.

The cooperation with the women CIGs (Common Initiative Groups) was wonderful. The women enjoyed the trainings and cooking practices as much as we did. We worked with 5 groups. During our stay much more groups contacted FORUDEF to participate in the program, of which they had heard through their friends who already participated.

According to our wish, we also worked on the FORUDEF demonstration farm, to learn about local agricultural techniques.

As the original project we applied to was about organic farming and compost making, we integrated these aspects into our work as well. We made a training on compost with FORUDEF and one women CIG which included the establishment of a compost heap for the neighborhood. In the end of the internship we conducted a training on organic farming methods for FORUDEF and the CIGs.



Harmony

The cooperation with Mirjam, my project partner was awesome. Even though we lived and worked together, we did not bother each other.

We complemented each other very well private and relating to work. I profited very much from having her, as a conversational partner, and as a creative, motivated worker for the internship.

Trouble Small Small

One critical point was the financing of the project. It turned out soon that FORUDEF expected us to pay for equipment as teaching material and snacks for the trainings. So we discussed with them and made clear that ASA interns are not responsible for the financing of the projects, but should contribute with knowledge and labor. Susan and Moses were very understanding. They made clear that FORUDEF won't be able to finance the Nutrition Program as planned, but they would still try to carry it out as good as possible and to arrange our internship as enriching as possible for us, and to adapt it to our expectations. Without pressure from FORUDEF, Mirjam and I decided to raise funds within friends and family. It was very successful and we could finance the project very well with these funds. We even could give some money for the future of the project, when we left. So, the financing of the project and usage of our money was absolutely transparent.

It was also not too easy for FORUDEF to find suitable accommodation for us. But in the end we managed it by ourselves to find accommodation.

Another challenge was of course to adapt to the environment, the noise, the pests, the mold, the attention and advances of the people, attempts to get money from us or to marry us, to find our way through the chaotic public transport and other difficulties of the everyday life. But I think we managed it quite well in most cases, and enjoyed it to adapt to the local conditions.

Outcomes

I had a great time with FORUDEF. I feel that our work for the Nutrition Program was beneficial to them. The program was continued and enhanced by our work. The FORUDEF staff learned about making compost and understanding the principle of organic farming. A compost heap was installed for the FORUDEF farm and the neighborhood. We helped financing the Project by raising funds amongst friends and family and helped to set up a proposal for the Nutrition Program to raise funds on global giving (<https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/nutrition/>).

The groups that we worked with learned about balanced diet and definitely enjoyed the program. They learned examples for healthy meals and how to include all necessary nutrients in their traditional meals. As we did not have the time and ability to monitor the effect of the program, we do not know how much of the gained knowledge was really implemented in their daily cooking practice. But from what I can tell the participants of our trainings were really open and interested in the information and seemed to be motivated to put this knowledge into practice.

As additional part of the program they were supported to grow foodstuff on their own fields, which should enhance the diet of their community. The idea was to store the seeds after harvest to build up a seed bank for the participating groups of the next year. The donated seeds were definitely beneficial for the groups. If the sustainable idea to store the seeds for next seasons to be independent from buying seeds from the store will work out within short time is not clear, as storing seeds is not easy to establish.

Also for me personal the internship was really beneficial. Beyond doubt this was one the most exciting and life-enhancing times of my life. I learned not only a lot about the Cameroonian culture and lifestyle, but also about my own, and how different life can be elsewhere. I learned a lot about local Food, agricultural techniques and the village life and practiced to conduct trainings with groups.

I experienced how it feels to be a foreigner in another country. How instructive it is but also how important it is to be supported and appreciated by the locals. Also I understood how exhausting it can be always to attract people's attention in the public and to be treated differently, even though there is no negative purpose.

The experience with ASA, including the internship and the seminars sensitized me on global issues, politics and cultures. As I come from a natural scientific background many of the ethical, political and social topics we discussed were new to me.

Multiplikation

The most difficult part for me is the Global Learning Activity. I want to work with children, as I know that things I learned as a child were most incisive to me. The experiences which are most important to me are intercultural comprehension and tolerance and the decrease of prejudices. I definitely will use participative methods as I learned them on the ASA seminars.

I will definitely lead role plays and discussions about this topic on the youth camp where I am supervising kids during summertime. Before this I will go to school classes of friends who are teachers, and make a theme day with the pupils.