Nurturing a Social and Solidarity Economy for Infrastructural Provisioning: Emerging Perspectives for Regional Integration from Cameroon

Abstract
The trajectory of African development is a story of shifting paradigms that have basically oscillated between egalitarianism and capitalism (Wanyama 2012). Infrastructural provisioning and essential services is problematic and rekindled community cohesion and heightened participation are deployed by village development associations (VDAs) to fill gaps. Social and solidarity economy (SSE) is heralded as blueprint for local communities bereft of critical infrastructure. Social and cultural capital is harnessed to counter inadequacy of capitalism. Drawing on empirical data, this paper unpacks locality discourse, evidenced through VDAs in Cameroon. VDAs thrive on deeply entrenched slogans: ‘our destiny is ours’ ‘unity is strength’ ‘let’s look inwards’ with projects largely financed through member donations. Solidarity agenda is fired up through elite financing, timetabled cultural events, assemblage of members nationwide and Diaspora to marshal resources for capital injection, and other subsidiary support towards earmarked projects.

Whilst ethos of ‘giving back to your heritage’ proves beneficial, this paper argues that these grassroots organisations can benefit from greater regional integration through sharing of expertise, regional markets, marketplace for cooperative action and mutuality, engendering a mindset of ‘we can do things ourselves’. SSE is one of the ways by which African development can be fostered into the 21st century (Wanyama 2012). Offering a development-based approach to integration remains the dilemma. The creation of a local government and infrastructural development bureau under the auspices of African Union to partner African Development Bank in fostering regional development is crucial.

Trappings of Social and Solidarity Economy
Solidarity matched with infrastructural provisioning remains a neglected and often overlooked subject. Use of maxims such as ‘united we stand, divided we fall, ‘let us look in one direction’, ‘unity is strength’ mirrors philosophy embedded in VDAs, with wider implications for regional integration. Yet, a contentious debate remains the sustainability of these associations given shortfalls in institutional governance, poverty and gender considerations that permeates citizen efforts at organising from beneath. As Kaberuka (AfDB 2013) notes: one thing which can really slow down the recent performance of African economies in its tracks is infrastructure, and greater solidarity is key to common prosperity (Kaberuka, Guardian, 2013). It has been argued that solidarity and collaboration helped African continent emerged from colonial domination. Emulating and reviving this attitude and value can serve as a panacea for building a SSE that works for Africa. As development discourse, solidarity movement came to spotlight at Social Forum in 2001, against populist forces yearning for alternatives, not state centric; grounded in moral, social and mutual perspectives. Though neoliberalism has had its downturn in African development, it has created space for community organizations to reclaim their development and re-invigorate solidarity among members to effectively participate in the activities of their communities. This argument resonates with Wanyama (2012) detailing cooperatives as increasingly fostering the social and solidarity economy, which, in turn, is improving living conditions in Africa.
In a context of deepening poverty, declining state involvement in infrastructural development, community-based organisations in the North West region of Cameroon have been heralded as linchpins for local development initiatives (Fonchingong C. 2005, Fonchingong C. & Ngwa C. 2005). Conjectured as a new form of mobilising to counter excesses of capitalism and citizens’ interpretation of the local, this study uncovers the rationale of solidarity from the prism of citizens organising from below. While there have been various co-operatives and organisations, working with similar principles before (Lechat 2009), Miller (2006) locates solidarity discourse: ‘solidarity economics embraces a plural and cultural view of economy as a complex space of social relationship in which individuals, communities, and organizations generate livelihoods through many different means, with different motivations and aspirations - not just maximization of individual gain’. The complexity posed by state–society relations to realization of citizenship rights in poorer countries reflects unwillingness as well as incapacity of states to guarantee basic security of life and livelihoods for its citizens, proneness to capture by powerful elites. Identity, affiliations, and access to resources continue to be defined by one's place within a social order that is largely constituted by ascribed relationships of family, kinship, and community (Kabeer 2011).

Economic activity validated by neoclassical economists represents, in this view, ‘only a tiny fraction of human efforts to meet needs and fulfill desires’ (Miller 2006: 13). Solidarity economy is an alternative informed by ethical and social goals. Profits and market relationships are subordinate to these purposes; it is an end in itself (IDF 2011). Village development organizations are championing the course of community development due to lessening state intervention. Paramount to these organizations is a shared trajectory - flagship for citizen association and ethnicity. This is bolstered by a strong sense of social justice, mutual help; ecological consciousness; and destiny.

Another argument deployed is growing elite influence linked to budding middle class. This is central to theorizing on solidarity as wealth sharing, political connections, governance and redistribution of resources to foster development amongst ancestry are hallmarks in unlocking potential of communities. Thinking through a post-2015 development agenda within UN system (UN 2012: a and b) suggest an agenda centred on four key dimensions: more holistic approach focusing on inclusive, social and economic development, environmental sustainability; peace and security (Birdsall 2010, Deacon 2012, AfDB, 2011:15); with elite buy-in to inclusive state welfare provision (Deacon 2012). A buoyant and cash solvent elite make a huge contribution through injection of funds, expertise, knowledge transfer and building a critical infrastructure. Whatever their motives, elites are potent voices, pressing for participatory governance. It is within logic of perceiving solidarity as a force for social good that this paper makes a contribution.

With worsening living conditions, exacerbated by negative fall-outs of capitalism, citizen participation and social cohesion are crucial in infrastructural provisioning. The deficits in capitalism as Wanyama (2012) posits triggered a rethinking of the ideology of development in Africa, with the result that social and solidarity economy is increasingly being considered to be an alternative way for fostering African development. Positioned as key players in grassroots development, I argue that VDAs are flag bearers in reclaiming development through greater mutual engagement that downplays profit and free markets - off-shoots of capitalism. Zacher (2013) captures essentialist function of solidarity: ‘it concerns everything wherein individuals and
communities develop themselves: environment, economy, civilization, and its culture, internal and external security’.

Solidarity is located within ambit of citizen engineered development with cultural identity and social capital as strong reference. This study confronts a central question: can village organizations anchored on members’ collective efforts persist in delivering key projects that uplift well-being. Momentum of project execution is captured through a bottom-up approach. In unpicking features of solidarity, this study draws on empirical data and case studies with focus on Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association (NACDA), unrivalled in pushing forward locality discourse in North West region of Cameroon. Shouldering development of heritage by looking inwards remain building blocks through member’s contributions and collective efforts.

Social capital and ‘we can do it ourselves’ mindset
In the face of state retreat in local development, the motive behind solidarity economy of citizens mobilizing from bottom to take charge of their destiny is aligned with concepts of social capital and ecological theory. It is about citizens organising from below, to provide key welfare packages that improve wellbeing for all. Village organizations remain a rallying voice in marshalling collective action for common good of members (Fonchingong, C. 2005). This paper argues that solidarity is a social engagement; a dialogic relationship that exists between reality and nuanced application of theory in context, mutual negotiation and assimilation of values appropriated to locality (see table 1).

Proponents of social capital argue that it is underpinned by social relations that work for collective interest of members. It recognises preparedness and tendency to sacrifice for one another and mostly commended for its tangible outcomes. Although ambiguity surrounds the concept, it is widely conceptualised as being the existence of social ties and the stock of active connections among people characterised by trust and reciprocity, and strategically mobilised by individuals and groups for particular ends (Coleman 1998, Putnam 2000; Woolcock 2000; Chaskin 2001). Elsewhere, it encompasses norms and networks facilitating cooperative action for mutual benefit, despite its properties, problems and downside (Portes and Landolt 1996; Woolcock 1998; Fine 2001). Within the context of this research, social capital represents renewed sense of commitment to course of community through regeneration and collective progress to improve wellbeing of members (Fonchingong, C. 2005). As shown in table 1, members are buoyed by a sense of mutual assistance, interaction and direction. Lister (2010:3) indicates that common good is central to communitarianism, arguing individuals as social beings are embedded in national and local communities.

Using environment wisely and ensuring resources are not quickly depleted also come into equation. VDAs ensure traditional ecological practices are not a threat to landscape. They promote environmental awareness and education on farming practices like ‘slash and burn’ agriculture that may degrade environment and reduce soil nutrients. Village traditional authorities also grapple with clashes between farmers and graziers due to destruction of farm crops by graziers in search of green pasture. In assembling vital resources, however, shifting priorities and re-invigorating development initiatives can be problematic for entrenching solidarity. Afshar (2005:530) situates ecological perspective with fundamental question: are we adequately conserving and enhancing our natural environment—land, air, water, flora and fauna – for our ecological and human health.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Elements</th>
<th>Linkage to VDAs</th>
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| Traditional authority (Fon) | Village leadership and overseeing VDAs  
|  | Land allocation for projects  
|  | Dispute resolution  
|  | Links with Diaspora and government officials  
|  | Conferment of traditional titles  
|  | Enforce communal values, ethics and common good  
| Elite Influence | VDA leadership and links with international agencies  
|  | Advisory support to traditional authority  
|  | Decision making and key consultations  
|  | Fund raising architecture  
|  | Cash contributions  
|  | Political connections  
|  | Community educative talks  
|  | Links with Diaspora  
| Social cohesion (Njangis and social groups) | Social entrepreneurship and mutual benefit  
|  | Social groups for women, men and youth  
|  | Credit generation and microfinance  
|  | Community mobilisation  
|  | Up scaling participation  
|  | Reinforced sense of cultural identity  
| Members’ sourcing for funds | Members’ contributions for projects  
|  | Resource mobilisation and volunteering at key development events  
|  | Cultural fundraising events/gala  
|  | Contributions from Diaspora  
|  | Funds from international development agencies and diplomatic missions  
|  | Pledges  
| Diaspora | Diaspora conventions/gala to raise funds  
|  | Website development  
|  | Technical expertise and knowledge transfer  
|  | Donations  
|  | Material supply for specific projects  
|  | Provision of specialist, essential equipment  
| Community participation | Cultural meetings and general assemblies  
|  | Project implementation committees  
|  | Leadership roles within VDAs  
|  | Participation in community development days  
|  | Ecological and environmental awareness  
| Cultural identity | Upholding heritage, language, and dialect  
|  | Cultural dances, songs and music festivals  
|  | Local dishes and gastronomy  
|  | Eco tourism and preserving greeneries  
|  | Newsletter trumpeting solidarity  
|  | Village almanac and magazine  
|  | Museum, arts/crafts, antiques and sacred artefacts  

Source: Compiled from Author’s fieldwork (2012)

As table 1 indicates solidarity is anchored on common interest; cultural manifestations resonate as central trajectory of solidarity schema. At heart of matrix are traditional authorities and elite overseeing governance, though their overbearing influence can be
detrimental to VDAs (Fonchingong, C. 2005). VDAs are increasingly challenged by intrinsic and extrinsic factors, potentially injurious to successful implementation of projects. Projects executed include; provision of pipe borne water, construction of bridges, community halls, Fon’s palaces, building and renovation of new and crumbling school classrooms, village markets, medical supplies to health facilities; digging and maintenance of roads. Amidst lofty efforts, quasi-traditional ‘social capital’ is problematic as VDAs battle to ensure development initiatives are achieved.

Figure 1: VDA solidarity operational framework

Source: Solidarity operational framework based on empirical data (2013)

As represented in figure 1, nationwide regional branches are functional external organs, vital in mobilising resources for VDA projects. Internally, village quarter heads are very instrumental in easing collection of funds by working laterally with traditional authorities. For villagers who refuse to pay development levies, they could face injunctions on their land, property and other investment they want to undertake in the village. This NACDA approach drives up regularity in membership contributions. Such units are also autonomous in commissioning projects that improve wellbeing of its members. Recently, the Batibo Cultural and Development Association (BCDA) acquired a piece of land in Yaoundé neighbourhood for the construction of a Community Hall. Upon completion, Hall will host social events such as births, marriages, graduations, and other social fêtes for Batibo indigenes resident in Yaoundé.

NACDA as harbinger
NACDA is borne of Awing village, found in Santa sub-division, Mezam division, North West region of Cameroon. Located in a region heralded for its self-reliance and mutual development initiatives (Fonchingong, C. and Fonjong 2002), NACDA occupies prime position in championing infrastructural provisioning through social relations.

Established 1962 in Buea, South West region of Cameroon, NACDA today counts 63 branches globally (12 in Diaspora); a women’s wing (25 branches), youth wing with 15 branches; 9 quarter development unions and multiple dance groups and other social networks (tax groups) nationwide (personal communication, NACDA executive, 29 December 2012). The current leadership is marshalled by Ntsonkefo’o Peter Akote, 10th President General of NACDA and under his stewardship the organisation celebrated its 50th anniversary (November 2012). At inception, NACDA’s mission was unequivocal: ‘uniting around self-reliant development of Awing Fondom, creating an atmosphere of peace, promoting its diverse cultural and social acumens, and projecting a good image of the Fondom’.

What is remarkable with NACDA trajectory are footprints steeped in ideology of rallying fellow indigenes of Awing dispersed over plantations of South west region in early 19th century. From its modest beginnings, its solidarity agenda grew stronger with first meeting of Awing indigenes leading to creation of Awing Youth association (AYA) in December 1962. Being receptive to new ideas and bent on fine-tuning its agenda to changing social environment, the movement had a name change from AYA to Ndong Awing Cultural Association (NACA) in 1966 and renamed NACDA in 1980 up till date. Perhaps, NACDA name change captures dynamics of an evolving solidarity agenda that sets the stage for futuristic thinking. In 1976, NACDA’s pioneer constitution was voted and premiere almanac launched. Its operational structure is directed by general assembly that holds midyear and end of year; at these assemblies, community initiatives are deliberated and actions agreed.

The 50th anniversary showcased NACDA as a development association that has weathered the storms in providing much needed infrastructure to Awing indigenes. The British High Commissioner to Cameroon –Bharat Joshi and Swiss Ambassador to Cameroon Urs Berner were among international dignitaries in attendance (The Post 2012). As prelude to golden jubilee, Nico Halle, influential Awing elite said: ‘we are going to consolidate love, peace and progress. If you don’t develop your village, you cannot develop your country’ (Cameroon Tribune, 27 June 2012). NACDA’s achievements within 50 years were listed as: opening of schools including mission, private and government nursery, primary, secondary and technical schools, construction of classrooms and provision of benches, constructed and maintained a good road network system, availability of pipe borne water to about 63% of the population of Awing, built and renovated Fon’s palace, built and maintained bridges, provided electricity, health care, a community hall and existence of pit latrines in markets to improve sanitation.
Table 2: NACDA projects realised, timescales of implementation and costs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Projects</th>
<th>Timescale</th>
<th>Cost (millions)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2010 Fact book (census and development needs data)</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>4,293,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-GSS Awing-Azane (2 classrooms, 2 staff rooms plus 5 chamber toilets)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>8,273,250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopt a spot (roundabouts with directions sponsored by families)</td>
<td>1 year</td>
<td>5,567,600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awing Education Enhancement Foundation (endowment where interest is used to provide scholarships annually)</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>22,793,500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipping medical centre</td>
<td>3 months</td>
<td>4,399,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awing Fon’s Palace and upgrade for golden jubilee</td>
<td>3 years</td>
<td>25,232,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Swiss water project extension project (80% sponsored by Swiss government and 20% by NACDA)</td>
<td>5 months</td>
<td>5,556,120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>German water extension project (75% sponsored by GTZ and 25% NACDA cash input)</td>
<td>4 months</td>
<td>5,175,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GPS to digitize all Awing villages</td>
<td>Ongoing</td>
<td>1,703,000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Author’s assemblage from NACDA personal correspondence (18 February, 2013).

As shown in table 2, major projects undertaken by NACDA include: construction of the Fon’s palace residence, development of a fact book, water and electricity supplies, cultural halls, roads rehabilitation, construction and equipping of a permanent secretariat for the NACDA in Ndong Awing. Other projects are: equipped hospitals and health centres. A novelty is creation of Awing Association of Civil Engineers for road maintenance. Also, fact book details mapped development priorities, usually distributed to government, diplomatic missions, development agencies and international organizations for assistance. NACDA’s buoyancy and development drive is attributed to citizen’s involvement, accountable and transparent management of resources by all and sundry.

**Stakeholder perspectives**

In championing grassroots development, VDAs rely on diverse forms of support (table 1). Elements of solidarity equation resonates with tiers of support from traditional leadership, citizen’s social support network, elite and sourcing for much needed funds and input of Diaspora. Interviews with different elements hail VDAs as key drivers in village transformation amidst shrinking state intervention. Summing up achievements of NACDA during the 50th anniversary celebrations, a top elite – Professor Mbangwana surmised: ‘there is need to harness Diaspora support from our sons, daughters and well-wishers in order to make even greater strides in what can make Awing a better haven to live in.’ He went further: ‘NACDA should consult constantly with vital elements in the Diaspora since the remittances from here can be a vital element to boost their development. Let us take advantage of the new dawn in the life of NACDA’. Signalling a redoubling of efforts by NACDA to work with
government, same elite mentioned: ‘if government provides the enabling environment, may be through roads, then NACDA will do the rest that it will take to lure tourists to Lake Awing. The development of the Awing Lake can transform the whole of Santa subdivision and the rest of the Region for a better tomorrow’. Another influential elite - Barrister Nico Halle ‘praised the efforts that Awing has made through NACDA and said they were successful, especially for the past one decade thanks to the support of their Fon, whom he said was a man “of peace, love and harmony”. He added, NACDA’s achievements had also come as a result of sage counsel offered them by their Fon (The Post, 2012).

At NACDA’s 50th jubilee, The British High Commissioner put NACDA development agenda in context: ‘only you can make your country an emerging economy by 2035. We can only help but we can’t tell you how to do it’. On its part, government represented through a representative of the Ministry of Culture lauded NACDA development drive offering financial support with the sum of 2 million frs CFA. The representative went further: ‘I want to express my congratulation to the job so far done by NACDA. You have contributed a lot to change the image and the lives of the people of Awing. We are behind you’. In typical style of unfulfilled promises and often lethargic government support, the representative said: ‘In the weeks ahead, a team from the Ministry of Culture shall, if the Minister so accords, be in Awing to prospect the possibilities of setting up a cultural museum there’ (The Post Newspaper, November 19, 2012).

Women are key participants in pushing forward development drives. Numerically, they represent a strong force in bolstering attendance at general assemblies, mid-year meetings and other regional branch festivities to raise funds and build solidarity. One of the women from NACDA women’s wing interviewed intimated: ‘We’re trying our possible best to see that Awing progresses by always paying our contributions as expected of us. The major problem we have at home is with the Mbororo people whose cattle destroy our crops. With the losses and poor harvest, we may not raise our development levy on time, but we always try and pay everything’. The President of Women’s wing said: ‘when I became president in 2010, my main mission was to foster greater unity amongst women in Awing under one umbrella, to work for the progress of our village. The number of women attending meetings and taking part in NACDA activities has increased. We continue to sensitize mothers and our daughters on hygiene issues and diseases like malaria, cholera and HIV/AIDS. We also emphasize cultural norms and encourage women to take up leadership positions in NACDA’. Interrogated why NACDA has been a success so far, another female participant said: ‘as women, we are given room to go ahead and initiate our own projects. The women wing is a very important arm of NACDA; it is like a voice for women in NACDA. Projects like health centre, social centre and women’s centre are projects that mean a lot to us, so we try and raise funds to enable us complete projects’. A member from women’s wing of a regional branch said: ‘As NACDA grows, we can beat our chests to say we were part of it and contributed to its growth. We have succeeded in repairing the roof and pillars of women centre in the village which was a problem’. Another member surmise on essence of militating in VDA: ‘we belong here and have that sense of pride towards our village. We can do things ourselves... and not wait for others to do it for us’.

**Contours of participation and gender issues**

Leadership positions in VDAs and NACDA in particular are strong benchmarks for participation, social cohesion and giving back to community. Men generally hold top
leadership positions within VDAs while women are more active as presidents in women’s wings. There are no legal restrictions for women not holding key leadership positions; most women do not challenge themselves to compete for senior leadership positions; this may be down to dominant patriarchal traditions and mindset that ascribes decision making to men. For example, in NACDA general executive structure, 15 men hold high leadership positions and only 2 women, whilst in women wing, women keep 25 key positions. In technical subcommittee chairpersons, there are 10 men and no women, 7 men in quarter development unions and no women while for branch presidents (worldwide), there are 59 men and 3 women (personal correspondence with NACDA executive, 19 February 2013). The women’s wing is a good platform for women’s issues to be factored into debates at general assemblies. It gives women latitude and leverage to undertake projects that address women’s specific needs. Within NACDA, about one third of development dues are given to women’s wing; for instance if a female member contributed 3,000 frs CFA, one third (1,000frs) is passed over to women’s wing.

Development dues and members’ levies are prime building blocks of capital for execution of key projects. Most VDAs have agreed annual flat rates of contribution for men and women. Whilst gender is a key consideration to determine levies, earning potential and area of residence are other determinants. Most of these village development organisations have operational branches in Diaspora that operate as autonomous entities, yet underpinned by strong links to their heritage. Diaspora also makes significant contribution toward earmarked projects and undertakes specific development projects in liaison with village development executives and project committees. There are agreed levies for residents in village, residents outside village and in other parts of continent (Africa) and Diaspora. For example, the NACDA levied men resident in Awing village 2000 frs CFA and 1,000 frs CFA for women who reside in the village, 6,000 frs for men residing outside village and other parts of Africa whilst women in this category are charged 3,000frs CFA. For residents in Diaspora, men and women have equivalent levies of 20,000 FRS CFA.

Mobilising capital for projects is the hallmark of citizen participation in communitarian ventures, echoing notions of mutual engagement (Fonchingong, C. and Ngwa, 2005). Reconciling the dialectics of gender and participatory development is an approach VDAs are keen to engage with to mobilise much needed capital for projects and to create a shared sense of community identity and inclusion amongst members. Oakley (1991) highlight ‘consciousness-gap’ between leaders of a society and masses being close with people seen as the subjects of their own worlds rather than objects of other people’s worlds. Through payments into development levies, members gain the strength to create solidarity spaces and to build up social, cultural, traditional and economic assets - drivers of collective action. Gender considerations in working out costs and input into project cycle through contributions in cash and in kind remain vitally important. VDAs have stipulated (statutory arrangements for upfront payments and calendar of payments is usually twice a year- at midpoint and end of year. This enables a list to be drawn up and monitored for chasing up those who are falling behind payments.

Apart from mandatory development dues, voluntary and on the spot donations and pledges are welcomed during general assemblies of the association and at various regional blocs/assemblies nationwide. Funds collected are then transmitted to the general treasurer and financial secretary of the association. Such complex organisational structure of most VDAs often leaves room for financial malfeasance and other underhand operations that have compromised funds sourced.
Table 3: Some annual VDA levy for men and women resident in village

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Village development Association</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aghem Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>3000</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baba I cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babanki Tungo</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bafut development Manjong</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Batibo Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mankon Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>2500</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mbatu Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metta Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>4000</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moghamo Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>5000</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nsei Union</td>
<td>6000</td>
<td>3000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ndong Awing Cultural and Development Association</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>1000</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 indicates annual levies and financial input of members that goes into project implementation. Other sources of funding include free will donations by members, proceeds from traditional fundraising and gala events, direct assistance (cash and expertise) from local government services; special grants disbursed by diplomatic missions and embassies and funds solicited from international development agencies. It should be noted that development levies are open to adjustments and may be revised upwards or downwards as agreed by members at general assemblies of Association. Though levies are streamlined along gender lines, some VDAs spell out categorizations per economic activity and income levels worked out on earning potential for public servants and business potential for private sector members. As highlighted with BCDA, top elite are levied heavily; public servants of upper-income, middle income and lower income are taxed differently. Depending on project under execution, cost and timescale of project, levies may vary considerably.

Local development through contributions in kind has evolved. In 1960s through 1980s, community participation in development projects such as roads, bridges, pipe borne water, school buildings, health centres and palaces required specific contributions in cash and in kind. For example, men were required to provide palm-wine, ‘head pan/ heaps of sand’, cleared the bushes, dug rocks and polish stones while women followed suit with smoothing patches and canals, supporting with cooked food (Fonchingong, C. 2005, Fonchingong, C. and Ngwa 2005). Recently, participation is less in kind and more of cash contributions. Generally, more large scale community projects require expertise and specialised labour, often remunerated. For NACDA, road projects require bulldozers to be fuelled; equipment donated for a couple of days by an indigene. Construction work is now done by trained builders and roofing by skilled carpenters. They do such jobs at discounted rates less than what is charged generally and they get ‘some appreciation’ for giving back to their heritage.

Social support networks and Diaspora

Mass migration from South to North whilst benefiting the North most has not been properly harnessed to yield concrete returns for North. Africans in the diaspora often tinker on how to square in with Africa’s development problematique because of dysfunctional and fragile institutional base. Though cultural ramification of VDA drive remains unquestionable, the volatility and fragility of social, economic and
solidarity agenda pursued by VDAs now require injection of funds from diaspora communities. With dwindling economic resources, diminished sense of participation, exacerbated by drop in in-cash and in-kind contributions, VDAS are battling to forge a social enterprise model that can deliver direct benefits for community members. Rotating credit and saving associations (*njangis*) are embedded as part of cash generation; vital linchpin and forms of direct finance for VDA development initiatives (Fonchingong, C. 2006).

In NACDA branches nationwide and Diaspora, *njangis* are bedrock for generating and re-distributing cash, pooled together from member’s contributions. Members use *njangis* as a platform for saving up against development dues and raising much needed capital for small scale entrepreneurial ventures and business operations. *Njangis* also incorporate a social solidarity agenda as members put aside some funds (trouble funds) for events like deaths, births, marriages and other emergencies. In Diaspora, NACDA branches have life insurance programs whereby in case of death of a member, premiums from insurance scheme ensures hitch-free repatriation of corpse and surviving family supported financially. While cash reserves act as a springboard for entrepreneurship ventures enabling members to address other basic needs, often these ventures do not yield tangible returns. This is attributable to default coupled with corruption and underhand arrangements. Anchoring the NACDA experience for regional development requires the creation of an office of African Diasporic communities specialising in eliciting funds, fostering and tapping vital support (both cash and expertise) from African diaspora.

**Influential and contentious role of elite**

Against high prospects for growth in many Africcan countries, the rising elite can be influential in embedding solidarity economy ethos and propelling VDAs. Most VDAs rely on vital connections and cash contributions of their elite. Elite input and direct cash injections are useful in canvassing and generating much needed resources. NACDA deserve mentioning through input of its elites. On the grand occasion-golden jubilee celebration (2012), Barrister Nico Halle - NACDA’s most influential elite was commended by current executive. Under Halle’s tenure as President from 1998 to 2004, some key projects were implemented viz: a multi-purpose Fon’s palace and electricity supply project that provided Fon’s palace with electric power.

Other VDAS rely on their elite for much needed capital in implementing identified projects. Elite categorisation is the order of the day orchestrated through elite grading. This takes form of identification of public servants working for government outside the village. From list put together under auspices of Fon and President of VDAs, elite identified are contacted and levied according to their earning potential within civil service. An elite militating in BCDA disclosed: in a recent project to expand and refashion the Batibo Fon’s palace; servants were classified according to their earning potential and work in government departments. Senior public servants, particularly members of parliament were levied approximately 8 million francs (equivalent of £8,500). Other senior servants, likes of top ranking officials in government ministerial department were levied about 2 million, whilst others in the teaching corps and academia were levied 450,000 FRS (about £500). The amount levied is paid in instalments within a specified timescale, usually one to two years. Junior public servants are also levied according to their earning potential and categorisation approach is replicated for big and small business operators.

Whilst cash contributions are vitally important in elite interventions within VDAs, elite are also instrumental in community mobilisation through educational and
awareness raising campaigns and schemes. Drawing on their expertise, elite participate in educative talks such as civic participation, parental role in educational advancement of children, promoting scholarship; public health campaigns, talks on hygiene and sanitation, disease prevention such as cholera, malaria amongst other subjects. However, elite involvement has been controversial due to vested political interest and personal aggrandisement (Fonchingong, C. 2005). Unquestionably, dynamic leadership of elite and reliance on individuals of proven integrity, and development oriented attitude has led to positive outcomes. Shrinking enthusiasm and goodwill can backfire in long run as VDAs struggle to fill gaps left by departing influential elite.

State, institutional reform and prospects for regional integration
The president of the AfDB makes the point: the key to challenges facing African continent is economic integration, but with a twist: ‘we have to ensure that in this process of economic integration there is greater solidarity’ (Kaberuka 2013). Whilst role of states in engineering local development remains crucial, VDAs drive to build a solidarity economy are often hampered by lethargic state policies. VDAs mention government input in promoting community ventures through creation of schools, support for other key infrastructural development through deployment of trained staff and personnel. However, VDA-state interaction is characterised by dithering, costly for smooth functioning of such projects. For instance, with execution of school projects, community members felt that government creating schools through ministerial decisions should be accompanied by other logistics of sorting out location; land and planning within suitable timescales, bolstered by competent expertise. Interviewees indicate that whilst government creating a village school is vital, it does not take away hard work of making available land, sorting out planning decisions and school buildings to ensure a smooth take-off. Also, provision of essential furnishing and didactic materials and recruitment of teachers to man schools are major hurdles.

Equally, influential elites with wherewithal to support communities with key projects face problem of state interference. Such interventions cannot be freely executed without permission from state officials and regional administrators. Though VDAs require approval for certain projects from local administration, navigating often complex administrative bottlenecks and bureaucracy has proven costly forcing elites to pull out rather than engage. In building solidarity, VDAs rely on influential elites to sell its development agenda, obtain vital funds and state support, this carries potential risks as elites in turn, fall back on their kith and kin for political support to serve their political ambition. The contentious, often times unclear positioning of elite using VDAs as a staging post for vested political interests comes under spotlight (Fonchingong, C. 2005). In extreme cases, elite machinations with regard to state apparatus has proved controversial; stifling solidarity as citizens are split along party lines and ideologies. This is counterproductive and does not serve overall, collective interests of VDAs.

Fostering a regional social enterprise model
Cooperative effort and cooperatives offer the best institutional framework through which local people can express their solidarity by engaging in productive activities to earn a livelihood and satisfy their socio-cultural needs as well (Wanyama 2012). Proponents for a solidarity economy have argued that it gives citizens the chance to address excesses and shortfalls of capitalism and free markets. Based on rationality of
common interests, within development associations are credit associations (njangis) that generate cash and give loans to members at very low interest rates. However, reducing the burden on members going forward, VDAs have to rethink their strategy by exploring a business model that generates more income to improve livelihoods for poverty stricken citizens. As agriculture is mainstay for most rural dwellers, creation of mutual agricultural cooperatives to better market goods and services is a proposition.

Within VDAs and social groups are common initiative groups formed by members to guarantee access to basic loans and start off capital for members. Stepping up through creation of cooperatives can ensure a bigger market and increased economic prospects of VDAs to reinvest in welfare schemes. Such schemes hold the potential of improving household cash income and reduce poverty. This thinking is aligned to Samuels John (2008); who sees solidarity economy as based on four ethical pillars: ethical production, ethical investment, ethical market, and ethical consumption. Determined to shake-off the shackles of capitalism, post neo-liberalism and structural adjustment, cooperatives have clearly reinvented the business wheel that they had lost to state control and market excesses. Cooperatives are demonstrating that the social and solidarity economy is one of the ways by which African development can be fostered into the 21st Century (Wanyama 2012).

This ideology squares with essence of solidarity - fairness, social justice, and distribution of surplus while moving away from profit as driving force. The elements of solidarity (table 1) and development agenda of NACDA such as investment in arts and crafts, ecotourism (Lake Awing), museum development, digital economy and web based marketing are projects with huge potential of creating markets and generating much needed capital in partnerships with other regional institutions in Africa. Fall-outs from such ventures, ploughed back capital enables VDAs to embark on large scale infrastructural project that require colossal injection of funds. Case studies from Latin America and Brazil in particular (Haarmaan Claudia and Dirk Haarmaan 2011), discuss concept, advantages and daunting challenges of cooperatives in building a solidarity economy.

**Engineering regional integration: Blueprint from VDAs**

Poverty, soaring unemployment and inadequate access to essential services jeopardize and compromise efforts at regional integration building. VDAs are finding it hard to embark on large scale and capital intensive projects like electrification, water supply that require huge injection of funds and sustained contributions. In sourcing for much needed funds, some VDAs are diversifying their strategy by canvassing for funds from some embassies, diplomatic missions and international development agencies. Such assistance is often in direct cash contribution and technical expertise. VDAs also count on contributions from kith and kin in diaspora communities (Mercer and Page 2010) for financial support, often sporadic. Competing interests generated by overarching priorities from different branches not reconciled at general assembly can prevent development initiatives from yielding desired results. To ensure viability of VDAs going forward, fashioning a role of regional development specialist within African Union to provide expertise with project implementation, coordinate training for project committee members will ensure a sustainable management of projects post implementation. Project experts can also develop project proposals for funding from African Development Bank (AfDB), international organisations and other development agencies.
VDAs may well revisit their management structure. In most VDAs, tendency is for traditional rulers, presidents and chairs of committees to take major decisions which may not serve collective interest of community members. To foster greater solidarity, regular consultation between Presidents, key members of executive, other committees overseeing implementation of projects and citizens’ regional blocs is mandatory. Counting on heritage and cultural sense of identity to push forward communitarian development, executing projects that resonate directly on wellbeing can galvanise participation. Apart from grand infrastructural projects with bearing on community development, in long-term, most community members may not reap tangible benefits from projects as wider impact on individual households is difficult to measure. However, respecting timescales and operational demands in line with ethos of giving back to heritage may hold answer to survival of VDAs. The intricate and complex structures of VDAs do not allow for quick decision making. Also, financial accountability is crucial in building resilience of VDAs. Governance structures that ensure transparency are crucial; not well managed risk evaporating community dynamism in communitarian endeavours. Perhaps, NACDA’s resilience is attributed to accountability structures embedded in association.

Way forward
This study has argued that emerging perspectives by village associations bolstered by social and solidarity economy holds the potential for regional integration in Africa. Against credence that development flows from concerted efforts, not reliance on lethargic state intervention and volatile foreign aid is binding force for participation. Rooted in cultural mindset is notion of giving back to your heritage. For cooperatives, participating members tap the energies of solidarity and economies of scale to engage in economic activities that they would not have otherwise been able to carry out on their own, thereby enhancing their chances of improving their living conditions (Wanyama 2012). As a corollary, VDAs are a binding glue of citizen strategizing, emblematic of a solidarity economy. With focus on NACDA, this paper has unloaded core elements of solidarity economy buffered by cohesive community fostered by spirit of mutual help. NACDA is a reference point signalling that development begins with right mindset, whilst solidarity cements that foundation. The potency of VDAs remains a central feature of solidarity economy anchored on provincial and territorial values. Seen as architects of local development, championing infrastructural provisioning and poverty reduction, VDAs require heavy injection of funds to embark on capital intensive projects such as power supply, health centres, water schemes and roads. In spite of great strides to bridge development gaps; VDAs are plagued by funding difficulties.

A fundamental question is: are VDAs capable of sustaining a solidarity economy that works to uplift its members and how can they be factored into regional integration frameworks? For VDAs to stay buoyant, developing a social enterprise model that yields greater economic benefits, fashioning an organisational framework that engenders participation whilst galvanising community members for mutual engagement is critical. In this connection, a regional conference of presidents of VDAs and other regional development organisations can be created as part of a regional bureau for Local Government and Infrastructural Development (LGID) under the auspices of African Union. Such a platform would enhance dialogue, sharing of expertise and good practices between successful regional development associations as espoused in elements of solidarity economy (table 1). Training and re-training of key
personnel to beef-up expertise within VDAs can be delivered through regional Pan African Institutes for development.

In building sustainability, VDAs require paradigm shifts in management structures to reflect community expectations; address unmet needs that impact livelihoods. As key regional development blocs, VDAs can constitute a linchpin of local democracy by pressing and forging partnerships with government to promote wellbeing of citizens. Its dynamism of engagement mirrored through citizen’s social groups, participatory process and community resilience is built on community pride at projects executed. VDA survival can be guaranteed by how well tangible and intangible returns for members are balanced within framework of solidarity agenda. Up scaling citizen’s efforts require calibrated support, synergy with African institutions like AfDB and other regional development organisations, tapping from contextual realities on ground. The AfDB programme for infrastructure development in Africa (PIDA) and various initiatives by the regional economic communities (RECS) were discussed in meeting Marrakech, May 2013 are laudable moves (AfDB 2013). Further to this, an infrastructural investment fund to grant seed loans at minimal interest rates geared at supporting the take-off and embedding of regional development associations would strengthen AfDB initiatives. Working hand in glove with African Union, NEPAD, and other regional structures like Bank of Central African States (BEAC), Monetary and Economic Community of Central Africa (CEMAC), Southern African Development Community (SADC), West African Economic and Monetary Union, opportunities for institutional reform, capacity and capability building and strategic governance can be entrenched, permitting development organisations to fulfil their development goals and aspirations.
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