ABSTRACT
This study examines the role of community participation in enhancing rural development in the Meta clan of the North West Region of Cameroon. The Economic crisis which hit Cameroon in the 80s created an impact which subjected rural populations to economic and social hardship. Worse still, was the government's inability to provide basic needs to rural population. Community members are increasingly shouldering the adverse consequences of the economic downturn by initiating and mobilizing their own resources in view of improving their standard of living. Evidence from the field shows that most associations in Meta have moved from basically cultural consideration to a broader development based agenda. This is usually through self-help development projects such as construction of schools, bridges and supply of pipe borne water. The reliance on indigenous technology and local resources has led to overwhelming popular participation in community driven development. Despite these participatory efforts to raise the growth rate and development of these communities, their conditions of living have continued to deteriorate as they still suffer from poverty and health related problems. This is due to the fact that projects initiated by the international community to help the rural populations have often adopted the top-bottom approach which does not meet the needs of the people. Most of these projects do not take into consideration the culture and realities of the rural communities. This paper calls for the empowerment of community groups by the government and NGOs through the reinforcement of their capacities, and the provision of technical and financial support in order to achieve the desired rural development.

KEY WORDS: Associations, Development, participation, Empowerment, self-help.

INTRODUCTION
Community participation has received increased attention in national and international policy in recent years. It is considered important as an end in itself as well as a means to the achievement of sustainable development and poverty alleviation (Stiglitz, 1997). In addition, different degrees of participation might be apparent, of community members in terms of their use of a service and contribution of resources, to their ‘genuine participation’ in decision-making. The degree of participation can vary between communities as well as by different members within communities. The interest in community participation has occurred simultaneously with an intensified focus on what external elites bring back home in terms of goods and services and this is seen as one of the means to the success of rural development in Meta.

Community life has been the basis of human existence. Most social norms, activities, interactions are as a result of man’s tendency to live in groups. Over the years it has served as an agency of protection, support, administration and governance. Its history is a reflection of how important community has been to mankind (RituparanaPandit, 2006). Participation strengthens the capacity of individuals and communities to mobilize and help themselves. In this way, dependence in the state is minimized and ordinary people discover their potentials from cooperation and mutual
endeavour (Bongartz, 1992). Community participation is an active process by which beneficiary or client groups influence the direction and execution of development projects with a view of enhancing their wellbeing in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values they cherish (Paul, 1987). Active community participation is a key to building an empowered community. Studies have documented that communities that engage their citizens and partners deeply in the work of community development raise more resources, achieve more results, and develop in a more holistic and ultimately more beneficial way. Community participation, then, is critical to community success (Bantam Books, 1994).

The continuous work for development by the local people in Meta through village development meetings, associations and migrants from Meta has prompted community participation which is gaining more grounds today than ever before. This financial and material support comes from actors both internal and external such as the state, national, international organizations and the members of the community themselves. Through decentralization, the state tries to promote some grassroots development activities. This has therefore led the Meta community to understand that they must not wait for the state but could participate in their own development. Cameroon promotes community development initiatives to help alleviate poverty by allowing people to create and participate in associations, create common initiative groups and NGOs.

Community participation in rural development started a long time ago as simple community work, unpaid work for the benefit of the whole community. Community participation is a word widely and popularly used in the Meta society, that is, the ability of people to come together for the interest of the society. This is more glaring in their farming system where members of the community come together to work on each other’s farms known as ‘Njangi’ groups. Also members of this community come together to open up farm to market roads, clean-up campaigns for the community, building of community halls and other development efforts.

The two main associations that cover 29 villages that make up the Meta clan are Meta Development and Cultural Association (MECUDA) and Meta Women Cultural and Development Association (MEWOCUDA). MECUDA is a mixed group of both men and women while MEWOCUDA is a women’s group in Meta. The development of Meta community relies on these two main associations. MECUDA has as its objective to promote unity and solidarity and to enhance the economic, social and cultural development of the Meta society. While MEWOCUDA helps to promote unity, emancipation and participation of women in cultural and socio economic activities. MECUDA is divided into home and foreign branches. Money from levies and contributions build up the association’s capital used to fund development projects and uphold the clan’s cultural values. The association also canvasses for funds from non-governmental organisations.

With the current economic trends and hardship, most communities that rely solely on government for their development, lag behind others. Poverty in most of the rural communities, has given rise to numerous initiatives and strategies at the grassroots level to help cope with this decline. That is why the idea of community participation has evolved in most communities. On the other hand, Structural Adjustment Programme (SAP) during the Mid-1980s, the same institutions encouraged and promoted a parallel effort of the creation of self-reliant agricultural associations in developing countries (Kasule, July, 2008).

In the present context of decentralization of the state and the redefinition of the roles of the different development actors based on the principle of subsidiarity, the community participation endeavours generally tend to be presented as the obvious actor for mobilizing local communities for self-reliant sustainable development in the rural areas of Cameroon. The state and the community need therefore to work in partnership if the goal of sustainable development has to be achieved. It is universally accepted and advocated that without community involvement and participation, development initiatives, either in the economic or social sector, have little chance of success, especially at the grass root level where the majority of the population resides (Pashupati N, 2009). This is why any project in the rural areas needs the bottom top approach to enable effective implementation.
These are issues which need to be understood before the community participation can fully contribute to sustainable rural development.

The vast majority of the human population in sub Saharan Africa is rural. In order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), a special effort must be devoted to promote rural development and foster better living conditions of the rural poor. This work therefore justifies the need for a strong focus on rural people and argues that community participation is the most effective way to empower the rural poor to get out of poverty.

**METHODOLOGY**

The design used in this study was qualitative with direct observation, semi-structured interviews, in-depth interviews and the review of existing literature as our main data collection techniques. We stayed in the field for a period of three months and were able to attend some of the MECUDA and MEWOCUDA meetings where we followed up discussions on the existing and future projects. We equally observed and participated in some of the clean-up campaigns organised at the community level. We were able to observe how the population is summoned for community work and how some of the important development meetings are organised. During this interaction with members of development organisations and associations, meaningful data was collected without asking direct questions to the members. This equally acted as forum for selecting some members for focus group discussions.

Through the in-depth interview technique, some of the members of associations as well as non-members were singled out and interviewed. Priority was given to the following category of persons: the presidents of the two main associations, the secretaries, the Fon and the treasurer. This was done with the help of an interview guide. This contained open ended questions and the advantage is that peoples’ perceptions on rural development were fully examined. Some of the members of the community were regrouped in categories and discussion was stimulated amongst them. The topics for the discussions were triggered from the in-depth interviews. The main criteria for the selection of participants were age and sex. The same question guide used in the conduction of in-depth interviews was applied here.

The method of analysis adopted in this work was the content analysis. The analysis was based on the issues raised and discussed with the informants. These issues reflected the objectives of the research work.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

Since the second half of the 20th century, lots of changes have taken place in rural development with the participation of the rural communities. United States Agency for International Development (USAID) in 1975 states that; if the beneficiary population takes an active part in the development projects carried out in their area, by participating in every decision making level, they will contribute greatly to the success of the development of their communities.

It is only recently that the culture of associations got embedded in the Meta society. At the time this research was carried out, the Meta community was already counting about 121 associations, 91 of them are women’s associations while 30 are mixed. Generally these associations have cultural, social, economic and philanthropic objectives. The reasons for the prominence of these associations are many. Some of the common reasons are enculturation, community development, economic reasons and others. Seventy percent (70%) of the informants affirmed that the main reason why people come together in Meta is primarily for enculturation while other reasons like development are secondary. The 80s saw an evolution in the concept of associations in Meta. Different groups moved from barely cultural consideration to a broader development based agenda. The community through active participation by its members both internal and external helps in one way or the other to improve development in this community.

In this study, we examined two major associations in the Meta community namely: MECUDA (Meta Cultural and Development Association) and MEWOCUDA (Meta Women Cultural and Development Association) which have played an instrumental role for the development of this community. MECUDA as a cultural and development association has scored significant successes in
the Meta clan, in several spheres, which are; education, health, infrastructure, agriculture, and the promotion of the culture of the Meta people.

In order to encourage education and literacy, MECUDA opened the first private secondary school in the sub-division and has constructed classrooms in G.S.S. Tudig, G.S Kai and Wumton. MECUDA has also constructed latrines and rehabilitated classrooms in Wumfi and Guneku. These classrooms were equipped with benches, tables, cupboards and text books. MECUDA awards scholarships to underprivileged and outstanding pupils and students to further their studies. The education of the girls has also been encouraged especially in the field of mathematics and other science subjects. These awards have often been given to schools that perform well in public examinations. The best school is usually offered a cash price of 25,000 FRS, 20,000 FRS for the second position and 15,000 FRS for the third position. This enhances hard work and competition among the primary and secondary schools found in the Meta clan. In the past years, MECUDA has sponsored literacy activities in the Meta language leading to a high level of functional literacy in the area.

Another pre-occupation of MECUDA has been the construction and maintenance of farm to market roads and bridges. The most outstanding one in recent times are the nine kilometres long Ngyen-Mbo, Tudig road and the Nyen Bridge carried out with the assistance of HELVETAS (an international NGO) and the Dodrecht community (Holland). The latter was achieved through the efforts of the women’s wing MEWOCUDA. Material support was granted to the church at Zem in Mbarakwe area. When the roof of the church was blown off by wind, it was repaired by MECUDA in 1999. With the assistance of the council and Plan International, a MECUDA office was built and equipped with computers, printers, scanners, photocopiers, television set, furniture, a motor bike, projector and mega phone. They have also constructed and installed toilets in the head office in Mbengwi. MECUDA has also been at the forefront of the building of a multipurpose hall and the supply of pipe borne water in almost all the twenty-nine villages of the Meta clan, including the supply of water to the Government Bilingual High School (GBHS) Mbengwi. This picture below represents the Njinibi millennium multipurpose Hall constructed by MECUDA on the 22 December 2001.

MECUDA has contributed significantly to the development and promotion of health services in the Meta clan by ensuring a clean and healthy environment for the Meta people. This is done by delegating some of its members to organise forums for educative talks on health issues like reproductive health and personal hygiene. With such campaign programmes, many people in this community have learnt many health tips like proper ways of disposing waste. Consequently, this has
reduced the risk of malaria attack and other diseases. MECUDA members also make sure they educate their population on the various vaccination campaigns going on in the area, like the campaign against polio for children under five years of age. MECUDA occasionally organises contests for the cleanest village in the clan. In one of such contests, Ngen village emerged first and grab a cash price of 50,000 CFA Frs. As a show of its high concern for health, MECUDA also constructed and equipped a modern theatre in the Mbengwi District hospital and made a donation of hospital beds and constructed new private wards for the Acha-Tugi hospital. Through these programmes community based organisations are trained on health issues, like exclusive Breastfeeding, prevention of diarrhoea and malaria and the importance of vaccination and sanitation. Twenty community based organisations for instance continue to receive training on the management of children’s related illnesses and reporting. A total of 700 members of Meta community received training in this area. Treated mosquito bed nets are provided for the Meta people at a subsidized price thanks to MECUDA protocol agreement with Plan International. MECUDA empowers its community members by building their capacities through participation in training the trainer workshops on water, sanitation and child Survival Sustainability Assessments (CSSA) which took place in Fundong and Yaounde.

Due to changes taking place in Meta as in many rural areas, most cultures are losing their values, in terms of dressing, language, thinking and behaviour. To regulate this behaviour, MECUDA has made it mandatory for all members to appear in their traditional outfit at their annual meetings. Also, work of arts and craft depicting Meta culture are highly encouraged and exhibited during cultural festivals and these arts and handicraft productions are appreciated nationwide. MECUDA is gradually modifying some traditional practices like funeral celebrations which retards development and engendered unproductive expenditure. In the past for example, the corpse of a person could be kept for as long as one week before burial. During this period relatives and close friends could not go to the farm or carry out their economic activities. Presently when corpse are kept in the mortuary the villagers go on with their economic activities without any problem and immediately after the corpse removal it is buried mandatorily on the same day.

In effort to promote the culture of the Meta people MECUDA is promoting the speaking of the Meta language by paying teachers to teach written and spoken “ngam-meta”, which is the language spoken in the Meta clan. Besides, the only language authorised to be spoken during association meetings is ngam-meta. Due to migration and contacts with other cultures, most people of Meta origin especially the young generation do not speak ngam-meta but this is gradually changing thanks to the efforts of MECUDA.

Farming is one of the major activities of the Meta clan. Thus the people depend solely on agriculture for survival and livelihood. In the year 1998-1999 MECUDA introduced new species of beans and maize seedlings to the clan. This led to improved yields in beans and maize farming. MECUDA is encouraging local farmers to abandon detrimental traditional farming practices like “Ankara” which is the burning of the grass with the mistaken belief that such practice renders the soil fertile. The farmers are rather encouraged to used fertilizers. Periodic agricultural shows are organised by MECUDA during which prizes are given to the best farmers. This encourages the people to implement new farming techniques in order to improve their yields. The first agricultural show was organised in Meta in 1997.

With the growing enthusiasm for sport in Meta, the MECUDA has of recent taken a keen interest in the promotion of this domain. They organised competitions in football and handball, for children under the age of 13 to keep them busy and entertained during the holiday. The second edition of these sporting activities started on the 24th of July 2004, and was sponsored by Plan Cameroon and Plan Finland international organisations found in the Meta clan.

**Inputs of Associations, NGOs and the Government in Rural Development**

In many developing countries, governments, development agencies, and NGOs are involved in different ways in promoting and supporting village community groups and associations representing the rural poor. Promoting and exchange of information and dialogue between all these parties has gone a long way to help in the collaboration on participatory development at the local level. Government has therefore introduced the concept of decentralization within the framework of national policy. This
is to promote greater participation of rural people in formulation, implementation and evaluation of rural development programmes and projects that affect local communities. The Cameroon government efforts to improve rural development in all parts of the country have been significant though not sufficient both in its level of commitment and its participation in development process ever since independence. The government and Non-governmental organisations need to work in close collaboration with local people and guide them on the creation of community based groups that can help in fostering their development. Nevertheless, with the current economic trends and hardship, any community that relies solely on government for its development, lags behind others. That is why the idea of community participation through the creation of associations is now widespread in most communities. Once created, associations now look up to the government and non-governmental organisations for assistance. With the help of FAO, World Bank and UNDP, NGOs in some developing countries like Cameroon have recently established collaborative mechanisms such as umbrella organisations or coalitions which bring together international and national professional voluntary development agencies, donor organisations and people organisation (Http/www.fao.org/sd/ppdirect/ppre0001.htm, 2009). In the Meta community, the government, through the World Bank has put up a loan scheme for constituted farmers groups. The objective of the scheme is to ensure food security and income generation. Also, the government through the agency of the Momo Women Forum, organises educative training sessions on, new agricultural techniques. Alongside the government, several NGO, s are assisting associations in the Meta community in the accomplishment of their objectives. Plan International for instance in collaboration with women associations open self-help community development projects. Through these projects, women become more involved and are able to participate in discussions. A vocational school has been opened in Mbengwi where young girls are educated on professional skills like sewing, hair dressing and arts. As a further evidence of relationship between NGO’s, governments and associations, a world-wide awareness and information campaign was carried out to mark world rural women’s day as a truly global event to raise the profile of rural women and bring them to the forefront. The campaign succeeded thanks to collaboration between two NGOs, Women’s World Summit Foundation, (WWSF) and International federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) with governments and grassroots associations. Development and cultural associations have facilitated the contributions to rural development in Meta and self help groups play vital role in community development. Apart from the contributions made by the two main associations that cover the 29 villages of Meta, there are also self help groups that have contributed significantly in terms of economic empowerment of the Meta people like dynamic mixed farming group, Kwen business women farming group etc. Through these associations and some self reliant groups, the community of Meta is able to lobby for funds from government and NGO’s to carry out some of their projects which go a long way to enhance development, Experience indicates that starting from well-organised local need fulfilling activities, women’s organisations and even those with joint men and women membership will find ways to reach policy makers and planners. Experience, training and confidence gained through membership and leadership in such groups are the first steps in gaining access to policy makers (WCRRD/FAO, 1972).

CONCLUSION
Despite all efforts put in place by the Meta people to enhance development of their community, they still face a lot of challenges which includes poverty, health related problems, low agricultural outputs and threats of extinction of some important cultural values and traits. In the face of modernisation, the Meta community has witnessed a lot of cultural changes like in the domain of arts and craft, dressing habits, eating habits which are detrimental to the people. Besides, most of the development projects initiated by NGO,s and stakeholders are carried out without accessing the needs of the people. This top- bottom approach to development has rendered MECUDA and other development associations in Meta not to be able to meet with some of their development goals due to the fact that the people of Meta do not fully participate on projects imposed on them.
Capacity and institution building in rural development is economically, socially desirable and imperative for the eventual development of Meta. Also, training and capacity building programmes are needed in which facilitators are identified, trained and can interact and exchange ideas with local communities at the same time instil new ideas. This training should be able to touch all levels of development. If the declining rural economy is to be revived, all officials at all levels must begin by informing the rural population of what is happening and guiding them towards full participation in projects meant for their own wellbeing.

No matter how enlightened the plan for economic, political, cultural and social improvement of peoples conditions are, they will achieve little until community participation is considered as an empowerment tool to rural development. In all, a better development approach will need a complete participation of all the members of Meta both at home and in the diaspora to have a new mentality and a wider outlook to make it work, and engage in a process of the development in which their full capacities will be exploited.

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