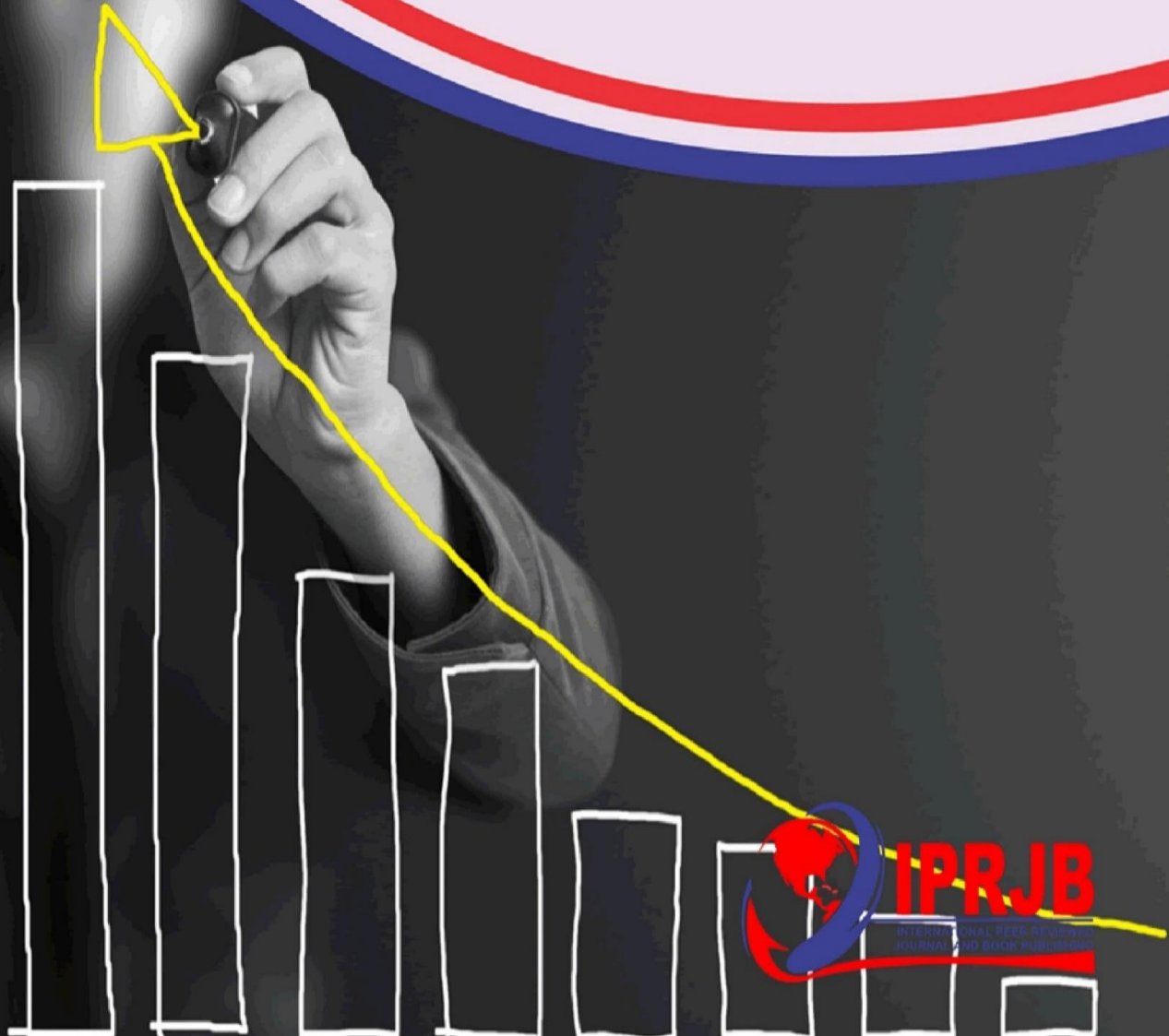


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**Ambiguity in NGOs Poverty Reduction Programmes**

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### Abstract

**Purpose:** This article analyses why Non-Governmental Organisations in the selected regions of Cameroon continue to participate in poverty reduction programmes when their programmes are not decreasing the number or percentage of people living in poverty.

**Methodology:** Sustainable Livelihood Approaches was used in the study as an efficient means of understanding poverty from the perspective of the underprivileged. A qualitative case study was used to understand Plan International and Summer Institute of Linguistics stakeholder's perception of poverty and poverty reduction.

**Findings:** Based on the findings, results show that poverty and poverty reduction strategies mean different things to different people, hence programmes aimed at poverty reduction should be examined using a diverse measure. The studied Non-Governmental Organisations programmes are not reducing poverty because there are extraneous variables which account for the ineffectiveness in their determination to fight poverty. For example, lack of beneficiaries' voices in Non-Governmental Organisations programmes during planning, implementation, monitoring and evolution. Gender role and power relation issues in these regions prevent beneficiaries from active participation in decision making. These factors account for poor prioritization of programmes. Additionally, attributing poverty reduction to Non-Governmental Organisations activities is something which the Non-Governmental Organisations themselves are conscious they can't fully achieve.

**Unique Contributions to Theory, Practice and Policy:** The paper recommends that Non-Governmental Organisations as well as the government should start their poverty reduction programmes by assessing the needs of each community in which they operate by applying the Sustainable Livelihood Approaches since poverty is diverse and means different things to different people.

**Keywords:** NGOs, Ambiguity, Poverty

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## INTRODUCTION

In recent years numerous Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) have come to occupy a very significant role in the fight against poverty in most African societies <sup>[1]</sup>. However, literature on NGOs and poverty reduction shows inconsistencies in NGOs adding value to poverty reduction. For example, Brass (2012) and Kpinpuo & Sanyare (2015) argued that there has been an increase in the number of NGOs programmes to reduce poverty but the level to which poverty has been reduced as a result of NGOs intervention is not clear. Choudry and Kapoor (2013) argued that the few NGOs who are providing services are duplicating services to gain favours from donors rather than providing services that are top priority in communities. These authors (2013:2) make it known that some NGOs are engaged in charitable and humanitarian works that have little or nothing to do with poverty reduction, and others have self-appointed and corporate leadership not answerable to any group of people other than their funders or donors.

On the other hand Bebbington et al (2007), and Namara (2009) show that NGOs' participation in poverty reduction has a positive impact on the poor as they provide short-term support to the needy. NGOs in Cameroon do not handle issues different from the above given the increased involvement of NGOs in the development process <sup>[2]</sup>. What worries Cameroonians most is the fact that a high number of developmental NGOs with the slogan 'poverty reduction is our target' are created in the same areas. On the other hand, poverty is getting unfathomable and wider in the same areas serviced by these NGOs <sup>[3]</sup>. The World Bank (2019) studies shows that poverty level has increased in the study region from 55% in 2014 to 57% in 2019 and the situation is worse in some parts of Cameroon like northern regions where poverty has increased from 74% in 2014 to 77% in 2019. The inability of NGOs to reduce poverty raises questions as to (1) why their strategies or policies are not decreasing the undesirable level of deficiency in the lives of the underprivileged in a more sustained and permanent way and (2) why do they continue to participate in poverty reduction programmes when they are failing to reduce poverty?

In order to understand the meaning of poverty and poverty reduction, it is important to know some key terms as they are operationalized in this study; Poverty relief, refers to short-term support to the needy during shocks that may push them into a more severe state of need than previously. These support are to help address direct needs and not for developmental purposes <sup>[4]</sup> Poverty alleviation, refers to decreasing the undesirable level of deficiency in the lives of the underprivileged, but in a more sustained and permanent way than poverty relief. E.g. state's social grant programmes which improve the impact of poverty for many people <sup>[5]</sup>. Poverty reduction, refers to policies and programmes that decrease the level or percentage of people living in poverty <sup>[6]</sup> Poverty eradication, refers to putting a stop to poverty <sup>[7]</sup>.

Cameroon is still a developing nation that is yet to establish adequate infrastructures such as road and rail networks connecting the country. There is a lack of basic services like education, shelter, water and health facilities preventing Cameroonians from getting out of poverty <sup>[8]</sup>. In recent years the country has received thousands of immigrants escaping violence in the Central African Republic (CAR) and most of them have settled outside camps with the majority living in the countryside and peri-urban areas of the East region creating an increasing gap between funding and needs in Cameroon. There is also a growing crisis with Nigerian refugees in northern Cameroon. Supporting these refugees has become more urgent than ever <sup>[9]</sup>. This

growing crisis is pushing Cameroon into chronic poverty. In 2015 Cameroon was positioned 153 out of 188 on the 2015 Human Development Index <sup>[10]</sup>

This study assesses the programmes of two NGOs in the study regions, Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and Plan international (PI). (1) Summer Institute of Linguistics is a faith-based organisation devoted to building capacity for workable language development. SIL was formed in 1934 and now has a workforce of over 4,800 from 84 countries. SIL Cameroon is a subsidiary of SIL International and has been serving in Cameroon since 1969. Administrative team of SIL Cameroon consists of six directors. The mother organisation is based in Yaoundé and has projects in other regions in Cameroon. Its areas of interest include linguistic research, literacy, training, translation, scripture engagement, and the promotion and expansion of multilingual education.

The aim of this organisation in Cameroon is to help make communication easier and reduce poverty, health problems and the neglected state of communities. SIL cooperates closely with churches in Cameroon and civil society organisations<sup>[11]</sup> (2) Plan International is a British based organisation working in 51 emerging countries across Africa, Asia and America to support child rights and lift children out of poverty. PI was established as 'Foster Parents Plan for Children in Spain' in 1937. Child sponsorship is the foundation of this organisation. PI plays a facilitating role between a child in need and the foster parents who would help that child. PI has been working in the North West Region of Cameroon since 1996 and in the Baka community in the East Region of Cameroon. PI works with eight councils in the North West region (Boyo, Mezam, Momo and Ngoketunjia divisions). PI Bamenda management team is made up of five top-level managers, six first-line managers and 192 community volunteers. According to the PI Report (2015:5) PI Bamenda is supporting more than 6250 foster children and their families (PI families) in the NWR and Baka community in the East Region (PI Report, 2015). Major activities carried out by PI in these regions to reduce poverty include health, learning, habitation, livelihood, and building relations <sup>[12]</sup>

Researchers such as Eyong (2003), Mbwoye (2014), Balgah, Azibo, Vubo, Mbue, Kimengs (2015). Fambon, McKay, Timnou, Kouakep, Dzossa, & Ngoho, (2016), Abia, Nchanji, Markjovert, Eucharia & Abia (2016) have studied NGOs and poverty reduction in Cameroon but literature review in French, English and other languages suggests there are no studies in the North West Region and Baka community in Cameroon to assess why NGOs in these regions continue to participate in poverty reduction programmes when their programmes are not reducing the level of poverty. To achieve the aim of the study, the following sub-objectives were projected (1) Exploring how NGO staff and their beneficiaries perceive poverty. (2) Examining the causes of poverty in the study regions. (3) Exploring how NGOs programmes are reducing poverty. A qualitative approach and sustainable livelihood approach (SLA) to poverty reduction were anticipated for this study as will be illustrated in the subsequent sections. Apart from providing an overview of the studied NGOs and poverty reduction in Cameroon, this paper may add more insight into the ways in which NGOs frame their poverty reduction strategies or policies since poverty reduction remains a top concern in present-day development.

### **Sustainable Livelihood Approach (SLA) to Poverty Reduction**

Poverty has numerous features, varying from place to place and crosswise. In the early days, countries used Gross National Product (GNP) to measure poverty. With this approach, poverty was measured based on the amount of income necessary to keep somebody alive <sup>[13]</sup>. According

to this approach, the poverty dimension was based on the income level required to purchase the essential volume of lowest nutritional intake for sustaining life and calorie counts. It was believed that nations with high GNP rates would have a lesser volume of poverty but this was demonstrated wrong as nations started to experience growths in GNP with rises in poverty at the same time. The fact is that increases in GNP were not evenly distributed among the citizens and those who receive little or nothing from the country's wealth continue to be poor <sup>[14]</sup>. Absolute poverty is defined based on the poorest of the poor's powerlessness to maintain their consumption, meaning absolute poverty is lack of appropriate income in cash or exchange items for gathering the most elementary requirements such as food, shelter and clothing<sup>[15]</sup>

The World Bank poverty line is 1.9 dollars per day <sup>[16]</sup>. This means that if one is living on less than 1.9 dollars per day, one is underprivileged and will fall under the category of absolute poverty <sup>[17]</sup>. From the above views, such measurement does not consider the differences in regions, class and beliefs of communities in which people live <sup>[18]</sup> For example, one can obtain an income that is enough to satisfy elementary needs, but one may possibly still feel underprivileged in comparison to one's region. As a result, measures of relative and absolute poverty turn out to be the ways in which poverty can be defined <sup>[19]</sup>

According to Nsah (2013:10) relative poverty refers to 'poverty of a specific group or area in relation to the economic status of other members of the society'. Within this view, people are considered as poor if they fall below prevailing standards of living in a given societal context <sup>[20]</sup>. Here the requirements of life are generally determined. What is essential for an individual in one culture or in a nation could be luxury or inadequate for another citizen in other backgrounds because the beliefs, customs, styles of living, and habits of a certain social condition could be the determining factor. So, one may 'feel' deprived of something compared to other societies or even in the same society <sup>[21]</sup>.

The above views provide compassionate understanding that being underprivileged can mean a lot more than merely not possessing some income. On a wider view, it can mean being subjected to manipulation by the dominant and the affluent <sup>[22]</sup>. Recently, the Human Development Index (HDI) has been used to measure population, life prospects at birth, anticipated years of schooling, Gini coefficient, and rate of poverty and unemployment rates. The meaning of poverty in Cameroon is diversified in the literature as stated above. People in different areas face different causes of poverty. For the purpose of this paper, Krantz, (2001) definition of SLA is used in this study.

According to Krantz a livelihood consists of the capabilities, assets and activities necessary to make a living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can handle and pull through from pressures and shocks and maintain or boost its abilities and resources both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base. These explanations emphasise that sustainable livelihoods should provide significant work that fulfil the social, economic, cultural and spiritual needs of all members of a society, present and future, and protect cultural and biological diversity. Meaning a decent description of sustainable livelihoods ought to go further than the basic requirements for living (food, shelter and clothing) and include achieving a quality of life that is rooted within the rich local cultures of societies <sup>[23]</sup>. Cárdenas Oleas (2015) argues that SLA can be a valuable instrument for understanding NGOs work and how it contributes to peoples' means of support. The approach stresses the involvement of poor individuals in the identification and implementation of activities.

The advantage of SLA is that it positions the underprivileged and their conditions firmly at the centre of the investigation and equally offers a general view of the lives of the poor that fits well with multi-level conceptualization of poverty. From the above views, assessing the influence of a project to reduce poverty can be done using the SLA, though. Helmore & Singh (2001) established that the approach does not deal with the problem of how to recognise those who are really in need of assistance because poverty can mean a lot more than simply not having any income to obtain the most elementary needs. This means that SLA does not offer a clear scheme for dealing with essential elements of policy making, such as people's individual positioning and collective worldviews or their knowledge and emotional affections. Similarly, the way assets and other living prospects are spread locally are time and again determined by natural structures of social authority and power within the people themselves.

Furthermore, the approach cannot be applied consistently, because if the approach is used constantly it might be beyond the real realities of numerous local development managers with the danger that this method remains as a good deed to funders and their consultants. One approach to neutralise this would be to make sure that all stakeholders are included from the start when deliberating how and if such an approach should be implemented, and to train them to use the method, and/or begin with a basic form of the method <sup>[24]</sup>. Despite these criticisms, the approach recognises that the poor also have strengths including physical and natural resources.

The poor should be at the core when developing poverty reduction strategies <sup>[25]</sup>. This is essential for planning support activities that build on the strengths of the underprivileged. In addition, it permits a more vibrant perspective on livelihoods, since individual powers may change over time as their approaches change in reaction to either personal or external set of circumstances <sup>[26]</sup>. Furthermore, SLA can assist in the understanding of the principal reasons for the continued increase in poverty level by concentrating on the diversity of issues at different levels that directly or indirectly influence or constrain underprivileged people's access to resources/assets of different kinds, and thus their livelihoods <sup>[27]</sup>. The approach is recommended in this study because if it is applied effectively, it can contribute to proper poverty reduction.

## **METHODOLOGY**

Data for this study was collected through qualitative in-depth interviews with 56 NGOs stakeholders (12 NGO officials, 24 NGO beneficiaries, 16 NGO community volunteers and 4 NGO funders). Different groups were represented in the study to provide wider data sources for generalization of the study outcome. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used in selecting participants. NGO stakeholders who have been working with their NGOs for many years and have good knowledge about their organisation were selected. The author worked in partnership with the directors and community volunteers to organise interviews in order to reduce all meeting period conflicts. The selection of NGOs was guided by the following principle; the selected NGO must be involved with poverty reduction schemes to determine whether beneficiaries were benefiting from the services of these NGOs.

The researcher's choice of the study region was influenced by his own knowledge of the regions, which simplified his access into data sources. The researcher has lived in the study regions and knows much about the activities of the NGOs. Furthermore, he is familiar with cultural practices, values, norms and languages. There were some communities where members could only speak Pidgin English or mother tongue. It was easier for the researcher to translate

the phrase(s) into English to mitigate the possible loss of deep meanings since he understood Pidgin English but he did not let his opinion influence the translation or responses of the participants.

The use of qualitative in-depth interviews was based on the fact that descriptive qualitative case study focused on exploring how NGO staff and their beneficiaries perceive poverty, causes of poverty in the study regions and also on exploring how NGOs programmes are reducing poverty. This approach gave the researcher the chance to understand participant's perception of poverty and how they have been benefiting from the activities of the NGOs as it was easy to handle pre-defined conditions and follow-up probing to develop a rich and comprehensive understanding of the participants. The researcher regarded the NGO stakeholder's as specialists as most of them have been involved in NGO poverty reduction programmes for many years.

Initial interviews were conducted between September 2016 and February 2017 and follow-up interviews between August 2017 and October 2018. Follow-up interviews were relevant to pursue issues emerging in order to reduce flaws and identify cohesions. All interviews were audio recorded with the permission of the participants. The researcher listened to these recorded interviews repeatedly which made it possible to produce verbatim transcriptions from the interviews. Any significant sections or responses that touched on any of the research objectives were coded according to the study sub-objectives.

The transcripts were word for word but did not include breaks in proceedings, varieties, and other elements of discourse since the focus was on the fundamental meaning of the explanations rather than their structure. Transcription was within 24 hours of each interview to make sure that the questions discussed and the answers were still fresh in the mind of the researcher. In the analysis process, similar responses were grouped into themes and common themes merged together. Codes were used to identify themes. The findings of this study are presented according to the research sub-objectives.

### **Reporting the research findings**

This section presents the outcome of why PI and SIL in the North West region and Baka community in the East region of Cameroon continue to participate in poverty reduction programmes when their programmes are not decreasing the number or percentage of people living in poverty. As already indicated above, the findings are presented according to the research sub-objectives

### **To Explore How NGO Staffs and Their Beneficiaries Perceive Poverty**

The definition of poverty is diverse in the literature. What is considered poverty in one area may not be included in another <sup>[28]</sup>. In order to deal with the poverty situation, Runguma (2014:28) and Onyango's (2011) suggested the following strategies. The first strategy is to define poverty. The second phase will be to measure the extent of the issue which consists of the creation of techniques to measure it. Once the issue has been recognised, the next phase will be to determine its source. Only then can one cross-examine the cures to poverty <sup>[29]</sup>. Onyango (2011:6) further suggests that poverty definitions may possibly give wrong messages on how to tackle poverty. For him, a more relevant approach on how to study poverty is well-defined primarily by the underprivileged who know their situation very well (Onyango, 2011). With the above notion in mind, the researcher asked the NGO stakeholders to describe their perception of poverty and also how they were affected by poverty. One of the participant said

“I think poverty means lack of fertile land for crop production. We do not have enough crops to eat; normally the corn we produce is enough for a few months only. Kids do not understand when I am saying there is no food. I have lived through this all my life and I am worried because I cannot provide for my kids” (PI beneficiary, 17/11/2016).

From her view, not having enough fertile land to cultivate crops is poverty. Meaning that poverty here is not only about lack of money to meet the basic need. They struggle to survive because they do not have sufficient productive land. A SIL beneficiary said, “People who do not have enough crops to eat throughout the year are called poor ” (SIL beneficiary, 21/11/2016). Their observation of poverty is closely linked to the amount of crops they produce per year. When there is a bad harvest they consider themselves poor. They perceived poverty as “lack of basic things needed to survive. Their expressed views can be linked to early day’s definition of poverty where poverty is measured based on the amount of income necessary to keep somebody alive <sup>[30]</sup>.

In other words, their definition of Poverty is linked to absolute poverty where poverty is defined based on the poorest of the poor’s powerlessness to maintain their consumption requirements such as food, shelter and clothing <sup>[31]</sup>. Though, some perceive poverty as lack of what money can buy because one can have money and still live in poverty because there are no shops to buy things one needs as stated by SIL beneficiary, “If you have money and you cannot buy what you need it is poverty. There are no shops to buy our needs” (SIL beneficiary, 7/7/2018).

There were other participants that differentiate between absolute and relative poverty, for example, one of the participant said poverty is difficult to describe because some people have almost everything and they still complain that they are poor: “it is difficult to describe poverty because you see people and you begin to think they are rich because they have almost everything but some of them are complaining of poverty” (SIL beneficiary, 7/7/2018). Her perception of poverty is linked to relative poverty. What is essential for an individual in one culture or in a nation could be luxury or inadequate for another citizen in other backgrounds because of the beliefs, customs, styles of living, and habits of a certain social condition could be the determining factor. So, one may ‘feel’ deprived of something compared to other societies or even in the same society <sup>[32]</sup>.

There were also some participants that incorporate some aspects of social exclusion as poverty, “When you are not married, you cannot talk when men are talking because people believed that you are useless and unmarried people do not deserve to be among important people in society” (PI beneficiary, 14/12/2017). From her views, she was rejected. Meaning she was powerless to take part in the ordinary relationships and activities that were presented in the community whether in economic, social, cultural or political arenas simply because she was single. Eddins (2013) makes it clear that rejection or exclusion from decision making can be seen as poverty as it disturbs the quality of life of individuals and the equity and cohesion of society as a whole. From their perceptions, all forms of poverty exist in the study regions and they all revealed how they were affected by poverty.

### **Causes of Poverty in the Study Areas**

To further understand the experience of poverty in the regions under study, participants were asked to describe the causes of poverty in the areas. Many NGO beneficiaries explained that one of the causes of poverty was cultural practices in their community as demonstrated in one of the PI beneficiary’s comments, “After the passing away of my spouse, there was a family meeting that made me lose everything that we had acquired together. My in-law seized



everything including the house and the farms and despised me and my children” (PI beneficiary, 5/12/2016). Further probing found that such practices were very common in the North West region. According to Sameti; Esfahani; Haghghi, (2012) irregular behaviours create a cycle of poverty because deviant behaviours make it hard for the poor to get out of poverty. Bourgeois (1997) makes it clear that cultural influence pushes people into poverty because people do not have controllable emotions of marginality and vulnerability. They act like strangers in their own communities convinced that the existing establishments do not assist their interests and needs. From the study participant view, she has come to be poor because of cultural influence.

Another aspect of cultural influence in the study region was the number of working days in a week. Instead of working every day in order to have enough to eat and sell left over, Study participants said that there are days in rural areas that people are not allowed to work on their farms as demonstrated in PI beneficiary’s comment in Ibal; “We have eight days in a week, among these eight days one can only work for five days and if you are a Christian that observes Sundays, you will only have four days to work on the farm instead of eight a week as it’s in urban areas. We have to stay at home doing nothing because there is a general belief that if one goes to the farm on a native Sunday, you will be bewitched and something terrible will happen to you” (PI beneficiary 16/12/2016).

These factors were seen to have contributed to increasing poverty in the study areas as people have very few days to work. From their views, it is very visible that these communities will continue to be poor because they do not have means to fight their poverty; for example, education and training are the keys to fight poverty but most study participant do not have resources to acquire the necessary skills or to empower themselves in order to fight for what belongs to them.

Another factor contributing to poverty in the region under study was land scarcity. PI beneficiaries in the Baka community mentioned that they have been forcefully removed from their land in the forest because the government said they want to expand and increase growth in Cameroon. From their views, the government's effort to expand growth in this region has created more starvation than reducing hunger or poverty. According to these participants, removing them out of the forest which used to be their home, only source of food has pushed them into chronic poverty. PI beneficiaries in Bafut consistently mentioned that Bafut is an area of extreme land poverty with community land holdings in Bafut being small and some areas in the community are very rocky in nature. (PI beneficiary, 7/12/ 2016). The issue of soil fertility emerged as a common theme in each of the case study areas. Many respondents stated that they lack human capital to improve their poor soil quality, further driving local incidences of poverty given that all local food consumption comes from local farms.

It was observed that most of the farms are located on mountain slopes and when it rains, the soil is carried away by erosion. PI beneficiaries in Momo mentioned that fertile lands are located far from their communities and they are not capable of engaging in any meaningful farming on these lands due to the long distances they have to commute daily by walking (PI beneficiary, 17/12/ 2016). From his explanation, they are willing to travel long distances to where there is fertile land but there is a lack of transportation means. This was confirmed when the researcher observed beneficiaries carrying crops on their heads from the farms to the market in all the study regions. In probing further, lack of storage facilities also fuel poverty in the study regions. Beneficiaries explained that they cannot store their perishable goods until they

get to the market: “It is not easy to keep some perishable goods to sell on our village market day because they will get bad before the market day” (SIL beneficiary, 24/6/ 2018). From their views, they lack sufficient knowledge on how to process perishable goods and as a result perishable crops get spoiled in farms because they cannot sell them within the week or store them to sell on market days.

Nsah (2023:556) argued that individuals at times are poverty stricken because they do not want to get involved in activities that will better their life situation. From the above views, those in poverty should be blamed for creating their own problems. However, from the views of the study participants, they cannot be blamed for their poverty situation because they are willing to travel to where there is fertile land but the problem is lack of transportation network. This goes contrary to concepts and policy assumptions that dwell on the lack of “will and skill” obsessed by the poor themselves as being the major cause of their poverty. Through discussions, it was also established that there are no secondary industries in the region to boost production and provide jobs for those who have skills to work in these industries. According to respondents, because of the lack of secondary and service industries in the rural areas the active population were migrating to urban areas in search of jobs.

The unavoidable consequence has been a reduction in farm labour as those who are left behind are the elderly and children who are dependents. It was also found out that the banking system was poor and, more to that, there were no other institutions to boost small and medium-size enterprises in the regions. Beneficiaries said they cannot risk losing their money because those who were able to save the little that was left after consumption almost lost everything they saved in post offices as evidenced in SIL beneficiary’s comment: “We don’t have any saving scheme. I don’t want any savings scheme. I used to save with the post office and since I lost my savings in the post office when post offices had financial crises, I have lost faith in all the saving schemes in this country” (SIL beneficiary,10/12/2016). Individuals need different means of support to attain optimistic livelihood outcomes. Therefore, absence or lack of physical capital such as equipment of production (land), financial capital such as credit, cash, bank deposits, liquid assets, pension and regular remittances that can be accessed by underprivileged to pursue a better living keep them in poverty <sup>[33]</sup>.

Climate change was also identified as a social problem causing poverty in the area. Precipitation was usually unpredictable and changeable as demonstrated in one PI’s remark, “We don’t really know when the rainy season will start and when it will end. At times, it will start very late. In addition to irregular rainfall, rainstorms usually contribute to agricultural losses” (PI beneficiary, 23/11/ 2016). PI beneficiary explained that, when it rains, the intensity and duration is so high and long that it results in flooding. At times, the intensity is so high that in some cases the farms are washed away. He cites an example of how high intensity rainfall washed away farms in the Fundong subdivision in August 2017. He further said that all roads have been suffering from wear, tear and have deteriorated into bumps and mud that makes movements difficult (PI field coordinator, 24/07/2018). From his views, their livelihoods are affected by critical trends (natural disaster) as well as shocks that distress individuals’ means of support. According Krantz (2001) shock here consists of natural disasters, such as floods.

Occurrence of killings in Cameroon was also identified as a social problem causing poverty. The study participants in the Baka community said there has been an influx of Central African Republic refugees in the region making the region one of the highest crime areas. The study

participants in the North West region mentioned the war of secession that has been going on in the North-west and south-west regions of Cameroon since the early 2017 as one of the main roots of poverty;

“We have been indoors now for almost two weeks and some of our neighbours are living in bushes because of the killing going on here. All the food we had was finished. I do not know what my children will be eating because there are indications that this crisis will not end soon” (SIL beneficiary, 04/07/2018). From the above views, an individual who is self-motivated, full of strength, and willing to work in this region might remain poor due to the above-mentioned forces

### **Exploring How NGOs Programmes Are Reducing Poverty**

This section discusses the programmes used by NGOs to assist their beneficiaries in the fight against poverty. It was found that NGOs have educational programmes as stated by one PI administrative director, “ PI is using mother tongue as a strategy to fight poverty in school in the Baka community. However, children are not interested in education and PI have come up with a new strategy called ‘inter-cultural multilingual education’. This system is linked to community culture and their way of life where Baka teenagers learn to love their own dialect, and culture from an early age. However, this is a failure as many children are out of school” (PL administrative manager, 18/7/ 2018). The same PI manager also said that they have brought in a nutritional programme to help provide food in schools but the attendance is still discouraging.

Further probing found that one of the reasons children were not interested in school is because Baka children were being discriminated against in school by Bantu children and this discouraged so many children from attending school in the Baka community. (PI field coordinator, 29/06/2018). It was also found that Baka were still living almost in a communal society where they rely only on agriculture and families are providing all their basic needs by themselves and there is a belief that children can be taught only how to farm. This belief affected formal educational programmes because instead of studying in school’s children are helping parents on farms or working in the Bantu plantations for income.

“Because of poverty many Baka families preferred to send their children to work in farms. They want immediate income and children are regarded as a source of income in this community. They preferred children to work in Bantus plantation to assist them with income. Many people believed farming is the only possible solution that could get them out of poverty” (SIL community volunteer in Baka 10/07// 2018). To overcome the issue of hunger and illiteracy, it was found that PI was giving scholarships to children and nutritional programmes to provide food to school children just to discourage them from going to farms but they were still not interested in going to school.

“We give scholarships to children and also bring in nutritional programmes with the aim that this will discourage parents from sending their children to work in farms for food and will encourage children to go to school, at the end they refuse to go to school because they believe going to school is a waste of resources. (PI administrative director, 02/07/2018).

From the above PI coordinator’s views, they thought providing scholarships to children and nutritional programmes will save families from using limited resources to provide school needs. The money saved can be used for the provision of other basic needs. However, from the

beneficiaries' views what was needed in Baka community was to assist them to improve their agricultural sector as stated in one SIL community volunteer's comment;

“The issue of children helping families in the forest should be dealt with first before children can concentrate on their studies in this community, because scholarships are not enough to cover family basic needs” (SIL community volunteer for Baka, July, 2018). He further commented that “children are dropping out of schools because parents do not care about formal education and the level of unemployment is very high in Cameroon (SIL field coordinator 27/06/2018).

From their views, formal education is not the key to poverty reduction. Therefore, they preferred to send their children to work in Bantu plantations that would bring in immediate income. According to PI Volunteer, poverty is deep-rooted in their life as they lack almost all the basic needs. Consequently, for NGOs' participation to have a positive impact in this community they need a SLA because what lacks here is interconnected. Solving only one aspect of poverty without touching the most worried part may lead to less impact. Researchers such as Eddins (2013), Thomas, (2015), and Graaff, (2003) highlighted that poverty is multidimensional. To deal with poverty there must be simultaneous provision of economic opportunities to ensure sustainable livelihoods and at the same time, human capacity of the targeted people should be developed for sustainability.

Construction of houses in the Baka community by PI was another programme to deal with poverty. According PI field coordinator through a needs based approach they discovered that shelters were basic need in Baka community; “The Baka were delivering children in bushes, additionally, they were living in horrible environment, in rainy season their shacks are leaking water, making life more difficult for them and we thought the best way to overcome this social problem was to give them modern houses free of charge” (PI administrative director, Bamenda June 2018).

Further probing with the same PI official found that their assessment were based on assumption as he further comment; “We never involved community members in the building plan to know what they really wanted, they were contacted when these houses have already been completed and we wanted to give the houses to them” (PI housing project coordinator Baka. 12/07/2018).

In addition to the housing project in the Baka community, PI administrative director explained that there were no toilets in their project community and children were dying from diseases linked to hygiene. Many of these deaths would have been prevented with clean toilets: “We believe access to health facilities is a basic human right. Sanitary toilets can free people from a life of humiliation, disease and females who risk shame, harassment by going to the toilet can be overcome” (PI administrative director, 09/12/2016).

Another interesting PI programme to fight poverty was the construction of pipe borne water in Boyo division. According to the PI manager there was an issue with the available taps in the division. Available taps were far away from homes and community members have to struggle in order to fetch water and the stream water was not good for drinking

“There was a problem of typhoid which was affecting children to fall behind at school and some dropping out from school. They were drinking dirty water from the streams because when they came back from farms they were tired of walking long distances to fetch clean drinking water from taps. Our organisation decided to aid the community with pipe borne water in order

to shorten long walks to fetch water and also reduce the spread of typhoid in these areas” (PI administrative director, 21/10/2016).

According to the study NGOs, these were very good programmes to get communities out of absolute poverty as they argue that human capital development consists of direct provision of basic social services needed by the underprivileged such as primary healthcare, shelter, nutrition and primary education. These projects were failing to reduce poverty because they were conceived and implemented by NGOs without the involvement of the beneficiaries to identify their top priority, hence, maintaining the same level of poverty as housing beneficiaries said they were not feeling comfortable in these new PI houses: “I don’t like these houses built for us, they are not warm and comfortable, my shack is very comfortable and very warm in raining season” (PI house beneficiary, 29/062018).

Some of the beneficiaries were still living in their shacks instead of living in PI modern houses. According to SLA, genuine poverty reduction depends on people’s ability and interest to use the local resources efficiently. That is, the poorest of the poor themselves must be key actors in identifying and addressing livelihood priorities as illustrated under the SLA section above. In this case, PI poverty reduction did not carry the aspirations and defined needs of the people for allocating, mobilizing, and managing resources, which could strengthen their capability.

Some toilet beneficiaries explained that the construction of toilets for them was a waste of resources as they believed that modern toilets are only meant for wealthy people. They preferred corrugated roofed houses rather than good toilets as demonstrated in one beneficiary statement;

“My house has a thatched roof which leaks water during the rainy season, this NGO supported us with toilet construction but I needed corrugated sheets to roof my house. You can see my toilet is beautiful. Look at where I am living. I wish I could stay in that toilet when it is raining” (PI beneficiary in Momo division, July 2016). From his views, it is senseless to live in a thatched roof which is leaking when it rains and using a luxurious toilet. Through observation and further discussion, it was found that the choice of costly materials such as cement to plaster walls and corrugated sheets gave a message that the PI did not have the interests of the community members in their agenda as many beneficiaries were observed living in thatched roofed houses. In their understanding, the cost of maintaining their modern toilets was higher than the cost of maintaining their houses. Nsah (2023) explains that sustainable poverty reduction will be accomplished only if outside assistance centres on what matters to individuals, recognises the changes between groups of individuals, and works with them in a way that is well-suited to their existing livelihood approaches, social setting, and capability to adjust.

Another program in the study area to deal with poverty was water construction. However, according to the beneficiaries of this programme, the construction of pipe borne water was waste of resources as one of the beneficiary explained that NGOs did not try to understand what was needed in their communities “we have pipe-borne water that was constructed by our council and our streams are very clean and good for drinking” (PI water beneficiary, 27/11/2016). The same beneficiary further explained that the construction of pipe-borne water was a waste of resources because they have important priorities like the construction of classrooms that they have been struggling to achieve for many years (PI water beneficiary, 27/11/ 2016). From his views, the construction of taps in their community was a duplication of services because they already had taps constructed by their council.

## CONCLUSION

This paper discusses why PI and SIL in the North West region and Baka community in the East region of Cameroon continue to participate in poverty reduction programmes when their programmes are not decreasing the level or percentage of people living in poverty. The paper concludes that the studied NGOs programmes are not only relief or poverty alleviation programmes but good poverty reduction policies and programmes that can decrease the level or percentage of households living in poverty. However, their programmes are not yielding positive impact because of extraneous variables which account for poor prioritization of programmes. The studied NGOs were not applying SLA. The NGOs beneficiaries who were energetic decision-makers that can influence their own lives were not part of decision making in NGO programmes and as such there was always poor planning that could not support their strengths. SLA stresses that the beneficiaries should be at the core when developing poverty reduction strategies.

The study then suggests that duplications of services can be resolved through an increase in partnerships and dialogue with all stakeholders, including the government and those who want to fight poverty. NGOs should meet regularly in order to stay better informed and interchange work strategies with each other. They should establish a folder with full data on who is responsible for what and where. Furthermore, instead of having so many programmes that are not yielding satisfaction because of limited funds, NGOs should close those programmes that are not top priority in communities. With a few projects they can employ qualified employees rather than having many projects that cannot deliver positive change because of limited resources. The study strongly recommends that NGOs, Government or anyone that wants to reduce poverty should assess the priority of the community through the application of SLA since poverty is diverse and means different things to different people.

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