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Plantation Labourers and the Resilience of Agro-Industrial Complexes in Central Africa amidst the Storm of a Scourging Economic Crisis: The Case of a Throbbing Sacrifice in the Cameroon Development Corporation through a Historical Autopsy, 1985-2002

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ABSTRACT

By the mid-1980s there was glaring evidence that many countries in West and Central Africa were under the weight of a scourging and prolonged economic crisis which was compounded by the devaluation of the franc CFA in the 1990s. Given that these countries depended mostly on the exportation of agricultural produce which suffered from instability and fluctuation in prices in the world market, this sector became the most affected. As such, a number of Agro-Industrial undertakings found it difficult to survive as some were forced to reduce their labour force, or embrace privatization as a panacea. One of such undertakings which felt the excruciating brunt of the crisis was the Cameroon Development Corporation (CDC). The CDC which was and is still one of the biggest industrial complexes in Central Africa, unlike others, was able to survive because its labour force accepted to make numerous sacrifices to keep the Corporation afloat during the most trying moments of its very existence. Using a historical approach and with the help of both published and unpublished sources, this study seeks to examine the role played by the labour force to prevent the Corporation from taking a nose dive and its eventual and ultimate collapse due to the crisis. It reveals that without the sacrifices, both material and financial, of the labourers, the CDC would not have survived the economic plague.

Keywords: *Plantation, Labourers, Resilience, Agro-Industrial Complexes, Economic Crisis, Cameroon Development Corporation, Central Africa.*

INTRODUCTION

By the mid-1980s, the seemingly stable African economies which mostly depended on the exportation of agricultural raw materials suffered due to a fall of the prices in the world market coupled with growing acts of mismanagement. The situation was made worse by aggravating problems stemming from balance of payment deficits, government inefficiency, capital flight, embezzlement and treacherous acts of corruption among others (Mbaku, 2004:398). The results were appalling as many countries were left with piercing indebtedness, galloping inflation, low income earnings and widespread poverty amongst others. As such, the economic crisis inflicted deep wounds into various economies especially in the West and Central African regions which became near chronic as they are still to recover from such economic rubble. Given that many of the countries here depended on agriculture, there is therefore no doubt that agro-industrial and other related undertakings were not spared of the unnerving devastation that threatened their survival. While many yawned for survival and others privatized, the CDC authorities in collaboration with various workers' trade unions solicited the contribution and sacrifice of the labour force towards the amazing resilience of the Corporation in a disconcerting crisis. Consequently, between 1985 and 2002, the labour force made enormous sacrifices to help the CDC stand on its feet in spite of the unbending situation. Though portions like the tea sector were privatized in 2002, the bulk of the Corporation survived since then unlike other agro-related undertakings such as HEVECAM, CAMSUCO and SOCAPALM. Besides, a number of non-agro-industrial corporations such as the Cameroon Airlines, the National Railway

Corporation, and the Cameroon Electricity Corporation were also handed over to private operators. In this study, however, we intend to bring to the limelight the sacrifices made by the labourers towards the courageous resilience of the Corporation in standing out tall during the infuriating moments of the economic malaise.

Origin and Background of the Cameroon Development Corporation

In order to situate or place the reader in the proper context and understanding of the discourse, it is mandatory to paint a brief picture of the composition and functioning of this gigantic agro-industrial complex in Cameroon. Following the scramble and partition of Africa, the Germans took and established a protectorate over Kamerun (later Cameroun in French and Cameroon in English) in 1884. Julius Baron Von Soden, the first German Governor in the territory, decided to set up the Botanic Garden in Victoria in 1890 to carry out experiments in the multiplication of potential seedlings for plantation farming. The research team at the Garden, led by Dr. Paul Peus (German botanist), tested thousands of crops in order to ascertain their suitability for large scale cultivation. Under Jesko Von Puttkamer, the third German Governor, vast portions of land on the slopes of Mount Cameroon were expropriated for the establishment of plantations (Bederman and DeLancey, 1980:256).

The lead in plantation farming was taken by the Woermann and Jantzen und Thormahlen trading firms. By the end of 1897 they had successfully established the first three plantations on the coast of Cameroon around Mabetta and River Ombe covering much of the Tiko plain and Victoria (Epale, 1985:23). By November 1902, the Germans had acquired additional lands around Soppo, Molyko and Lysoka. These plantations concentrated in the cultivation of crops such as cocoa, coffee, cotton, kola nuts, rubber, oil palms, tobacco and tea (Bandindi. 1978/79:10).

By 1914, when the First World War broke out, the Germans counted about 58 plantation estates in Kamerun. Almost all of these plantations were located between Victoria and Kumba (Ardener, 1960:206; Epale, 1985:100). Following the defeat of the Germans in the war in Kamerun in 1916, the British and French who chased the Germans from the territory ended up with its partition between them in February that year and most of the plantations fell under the British Southern Cameroons. Following the resolutions of the Paris Peace Conference of 1919, all German colonies and colonial possessions were seized and placed under the control of the Custodian of Enemy Property, which was set up to temporally manage the ex-enemy assets. In 1922, however, the British tried auctioning the plantations when they found out that it would be too costly to revamp them from the shackles of the war but without success. In November 1924, the British authorities organized the second auction sales of the Cameroons plantations and German planters who were allowed to participate this time around succeeded in buying them. Besides the plantations, they also bought former property such as railway lines, rolling stock, bridges, wharves, factories and dwellings (Bederman and DeLancey, 1980:253). Given this development, the German planters returned to Cameroon.

During the Second World War, the German investments were again seized by the Allied powers and entrusted in the care of the Custodian of Enemy Property, with headquarters in Lagos, Nigeria. Some of the indigenous people like the Bakweri started agitating for return of their ancestral lands which hosted many of the plantations. The Bakweri Land Committee (later the Bakweri Land Claim Committee), the Bakweri wrote a number of petitions to the British Crown and the UN in relation to their ancestral lands. In one of such petitions in 1946, the Committee condemned the illegal occupation of their lands by the British without negotiation or compensation.[1] In spite of the pressure, the British authorities decided to act otherwise. They doubted if the plantations would survive if left solely in the hands of the indigenes that they believed did not have the managerial and technical skills to manage them. In 1946, the British authorities announced that the plantation lands would be leased to a newly established statutory corporation, the Commonwealth Development Corporation (later Cameroon Development Corporation) (Epale, 1985:137-139). Its establishment was in an attempt to fulfill Article 78 of UN Charter, which called on

[1] NAB, Qf/e (1946) 1, Bakweri Land Committee, Petition against the Illegal Occupation of the Bakweri Lands, 1946, p. 19.

the trusteeship powers to work for the welfare and the socio-economic development of the territories entrusted to their care. The British embraced this obligation and decided to reorganize the plantation sector with the hope that the opposition of the Bakweri to the exploitation of their ancestral lands would decline (Ibid.:136; Konings, 1993:39).

In a special session of the Nigerian Legislative Council that met from 9 to 12 December 1946, two ordinances were passed in relation to the former German plantations in the Southern Cameroons. The first was the Ex-Enemy Lands (Cameroons) Ordinance No. 38 (1946). It provided for the acquisition of the ex-German plantation lands from the Custodian of Enemy Property. The second, Ordinance No. 39 (1946) provided for the establishment of the CDC. By this Ordinance, all lands acquired by the Governor under the first ordinance would be leased to the CDC. The CDC lands covered approximately 98,000 hectares of which about 36,559 hectares had been cultivated by the end of June 1989.[2] Epale (1985:137-139) contents that the lands were bought at an estimated sum amounting to £850,000 and leased out to the Corporation for a period of 60 years renewable for an equivalent term at the Corporation's option. On 30 June 1947 the CDC became functional. Between 1947 and 1954, the Corporation paid rents to the Nigerian government amounting to £144,038. In 1954 the Corporation was handed over to the government of the Southern Cameroons as a "free gift," and thereafter, it received the legal right to continue getting the said rents. Since independence the CDC remained the highest employer of workers in Cameroon second only to the government.

Labour Exigencies

Shortly after the Germans established the plantations along the coast of Cameroon, they realized that they could hardly meet up with the supply of labour from the areas where the estates were located. Epale (1985:46-47) and Aka (2002:89) content that the German planters could hardly secure an adequate labour force from within the plantation vicinity because of the sparse nature of the population. Conversely, Bederman (1967:316; 1968: 25), hideously uses socio-cultural disquisition to describe the visible absence of a large number of indigenes as labourers from the CDC plantations. According to him, the Bakweri of Victoria Division had never been able to supply all the labour required on the commercial estates because they preferred mostly office clerical or tradesman's work to farm labour, whereas the Nigerians and the migrants from the north (Grassfields) came from areas with long farming traditions. DeLancey (1972:72) maintains that some of indigenous people were engaged in trade as middlemen along the coast of Cameroon which they believed were more profitable than manual work in the plantations. To him, some Bakweri indigenes were not willing to provide labour for the plantations because of their aversion for the Germans whom they accused of expropriating their ancestral lands without prior consultation and compensation. It was against this backdrop that Bederman (1968:25) maintains that by 1967 there were approximately 144,000 people residing in Fako but only 13,000 were engaged in plantation agriculture.

Confronted with the difficulty of recruiting enough labour force from the coast, the plantation owners turned to the Grassfields, French Cameroon and even Nigeria as a remedy to the problem. Ardener, Adener and Warmington (1960:28) hold that by 1955, out of the ten numerically important ethnic groups – Igbo, Efik-Ibiobio, Aghem, Bayang, Bafut, Menemo, Bali, Keaka, Ngie and Bakweri which comprised 55.5 percent of the entire CDC labour force, the Bakweri accounted for only 5.0 percent of a total of 24.694 workers. These groups came from an area which depended on subsistence agriculture with comparatively little trading activity and thus, wanted to improve their lives by engaging in the money economic of the plantation system.

Since its creation, the CDC's predominant position as a great employer of labour can hardly be underestimated. By 1947, the labour force stood at about 16,646 labourers (Konings, 1993:64) with most of them being of Grassfields origin as already discussed. By 1985, the CDC had over 20 plantations with close to 15,500 employees, maintaining its position as the second largest employer in Cameroon after the government over the years.[3] In the years prior to the crisis, the Corporation was making

[2] CDC Annual Report and Accounts for the 12 Months Ended 30 June 1989, p. 10.

[3] CDC Annual Report for the Year Ending 1985.

considerable profits amounting to about FCFA 2 billion. Following the crisis however, the situation became precarious and near bankruptcy due to substantial losses registered as far as its accounts were concerned. Between 1986 and 1989, for example, the Corporation suffered a loss of about FCFA 9 billion due to the crisis (Konings, 1995:527). In this stalemate, something had to be done urgently to rescue this giant employer of labour from the shackles of economic distress.

Survival Drive and Labour Implication

With the advent of the crisis, the CDC authorities set to work almost immediately to find ways to nib the economic malaise in the bud. Early in 1987 the CDC authorities approached the trade union presidents[4] on the Corporation's estates to solicit their assistance and to find a way to adopt and implement recovery measures. Given that such measures were going to be painful, the CDC authorities wanted to secure the backing of the trade unions in order to forestall any dissenting action that might arise on the part of the employees. The trade unions were at first reluctant to engage this seemingly complicated line of action but subsequently accepted to participate in the Corporation's recovery plan. They hoped that the intended sacrifices would prevent the loss of jobs if the Corporation was to be saved from imminent collapse.

The CDC authorities went on to use two main approaches in their attempt to accelerate the recovery process. They adopted the consultation or lobby strategy where they worked in synergy with the labour and trade union authorities in order to gain their support in finding a common ground to fight the crisis. Secondly, they also engaged the sensitization approach where a series of campaign meetings were organized with labourers in an attempt to convince them to accept certain jaw-breaking reforms in relation to productivity.

In March 1987, the CDC authorities organized the first meeting with Staff Representatives aimed at seeking a solution to the crisis presided at by retired Chief Justice S. M. L. Endeley, the Board Chair of the Corporation. This was followed by another meeting in July 1987 between John Niba Ngu, General Manager of the CDC, and supervisory and management staff of the Corporation. The outcome of these meetings included the resolution of making significant increase in production on the part of the labourers as a measure to fight the crisis. It was resolved that the Corporation was no longer committed in providing free electricity to its workers. There was to be a reduction in the supply of cooking gas and no more free accommodation to management staff. However, the labourers were to continue benefiting from free housing in the estates but their maintenance was to be done only on exceptional cases such as liking roofs. Furthermore, "all unnecessary allowances were to be stopped forthwith." Meanwhile, medical care was to be "provided only to members of the family in the classical sense of it. However, if medical care is provided to the external family, the worker concerned will be billed." Both the management and supervisory staff were to participate in compulsory savings in order to keep the Corporation alive. Besides, task work was to be increased on the estates in an attempt to enhance increased productivity.[5]

As far as compulsory savings were concerned, those earning between FCFA 60,000 and FCFA 99,000 were to contribute 5 percent of their monthly pay while those earning as from FCFA 100,000 were to do so all geared towards ploughing back into the Corporation. This was accompanied by the promise that their money would be paid back with interest as soon as the financial situation of the Corporation became stable.[6] The compulsory savings were to create more liquidity for the CDC and make it credit worthy and eligible for more overdraft facilities. This was mathematically expressed using the example that if total monthly pay in the Corporation was FCFA 700 million, and if the

[4]Various trade unions took care of the interests of labourers in the divisions in which they were situated. For example, the Fako Agricultural Workers Union (FAWU) mostly covered workers on CDC estates that were situated in Fako Division while the Meme Agricultural Workers Union (MAWU) did so for those in Meme Division.

[5]ADLSIP, Bu. 134, Vol. IV, CDC General Correspondence, Minutes of Mass Meetings with Workers of Estates/Services of the CDC in Connection with the Economic Crisis, March-August 1987, pp.729-730.

[6]Ibid., pp. 729-730.

employees could contribute between FCFA 100 million and FCFA 150 million, the Corporation would be able to ask for inferior amounts from banks.[7]

Furthermore, it was resolved that since most of the labourers did not earn up to FCFA 60,000 monthly, their own contribution would be an increase in output. Palm harvesters were, for example, expected to "…harvest more than the laid down tasks" while those in the banana estates "were called upon to increase their productivity so that banana could live up to expectation." On their part, rubber tappers were expected to tap 500 instead of 450 trees daily. Meanwhile, the daily quota of labourers (tea pluckers) on the tea estates[8]was increased from 26kg to 32kg of green leaves.[9]

On 3 August 1987 there was another meeting at the Bota Staff Club between the CDC management and trade union leaders to seek ways of implementing the measures taken so far as well as discussing further actions to combat the heightening impact of the crisis. The CDC delegation of 22 was mostly made up of estate managers and other top management staff. They were led by the General Manager, John Niba Ngu, who presided at the meeting. The works' unions sent in 8 representatives. The Fako Agriculture Workers Union (FAWU) was led by C.P.N. Vewessee while the Meme Agricultural Workers Union (MAWU) was led by A. K. Kude. The Labour Department sent in 2 Assistant Labour Inspectors (Linus Ndikum and Muluh) from Buea and 1 Divisional Labour Inspector (Charles Ebot) from Limbe to sit in as observers.[10]

At the meeting, John Niba Ngu, General Manager of the CDC, presented a picture of the financial quagmire of the Corporation when he intimated that the company's overdraft position had recently moved up from FCFA 1.5 billion to FCFA 8 billion. He lamented that the prices of the Corporation's produce had continued to fall below production cost making it practically impossible for it to survive as "the overall situation was still accelerating towards a dangerous crash." He reiterated that the banks too had problems and had come to their lending elasticity limits. John Niba Ngu therefore, accentuated that "the only option left for survival was further sacrifices by every worker as this was an over-loaded sinking ship and some cargo of the financial costs have to be over-boarded to reload the sinking cash flow."[11]

The CDC General Manager tabled a number of proposals which those present at the meeting adopted after some reflection. For example, electricity consumption was to be converted to cash at the rate of FCFA 35 per unit and paid to staff on monthly basis. The Corporation was to pay a cooking gas allowance of between FCFA 10,000 and FCFA 11,000 to management staff monthly rather than supplying them with the said gas. The purchase of furniture for such staff was to cease and the maintenance of houses such as liking roof was to be discontinued but for exceptional cases. As earlier proposed, workers earning between FCFA 60,000 and FCFA 10,000 were to compulsorily save 5 percent of their monthly pay while those earning FCFA 100, 000 or more were to safe 10 percent of their salaries every month. It was however, agreed during the August 1987 meeting that the savings would fetch an interest of 10 percent per annum for the workers and would be paid when the financial situation of the Corporation improved or when an employee was leaving the company. The General Manager pointed out that the task requirement, as earlier proposed, for tea pluckers were accepted in the Ndu and Djuttisa estates but those on the Tole estate resisted the appeal and therefore pleaded with the unions to help convince them to accept the new task.[12]

[7]Ibid., p. 730.

[8]Until 2002, the CDC managed the three tea estates situated at Tole in the South West Province, Djuttisa in the West Province and Ndu in the North West Province respectively. Unlike the other two, women constituted the majority of the labourers on the Tole Tea Estate over the years.

[9]ADLSIP, Bu. 134, Vol. IV, CDC General Correspondence, Minutes of Mass Meetings with Workers of Estates/Services of the CDC in Connection with the Economic Crisis, March-August 1987, p. 730.

[10]ADLSIB, MTPS/DPTPS/SWP/Bu. 112, Vol. 1, CDC General Correspondence, "Minutes of Meeting of 3 August 1987 on Further Measures to Combat the Economic Crisis," pp. 122-123.

[11]Ibid., p.123.

[12]ADLSIB, MTPS/DPTPS/SWP/Bu. 112, Vol. I, CDC, Minutes of Meeting on Further Measures to Combat the Economic Crisis, 3 August 1987, pp. 124-126. It is worth noting that labourers on the Tole Tea Estate, most of them women, and a number of

By the close of the meeting of 3 August 1987, the General Manager of the CDC appealed to the labour and trade union authorities to go around the estates and services to sensitize all workers in an attempt to get their approval on the resolutions arrived at. Between 31 August 1987 and 16 September 1987, therefore, 21 sensitization campaigns through "Mass Meetings" were organized with the management staff and labourers of various CDC estates beginning with the Idenau palms/mill and ending with the Ndu Tea Estate. In all, C. P. N. Vewessee, President of FAWU, acted as the main speaker of the campaign team. His team had the duty of convincing the labourers, especially, to accept making the stipulated sacrifices for the recovery of the Corporation if they wanted to save their jobs. Everywhere his team went, the lectures were basically the same. Emphasis was laid on the fact that:

E*ach worker had to contribute its [sic] towards solving the crisis. He [Vewessee] used the analogy of a collective fight in putting out an outbreak of a fire disaster which becomes the concern of even a passerby. He likened this situation to CDC and said if swift action is not taken, they risk pacing home as did a sister corporation, PAMOL Cameroon.*[13]

In spite of the steps taken so far, the problems of the CDC were far beyond ending. This led the government to sign a four-year performance contract (1989/90-1993/94) with the CDC in which the Corporation was expected to fulfill certain objectives in areas of development, cost of production, output and efficiency. In exchange, the government was to cancel part of the Corporation's debts and exempt it from the payment of certain taxes. The General Manager of the Corporation beckoned on both the management staff and the labourers to sit up and made it clear that management would not condole with acts of indiscipline, laxity and unproductiveness among workers. He was categorical on these when he affirmed that:

In the Contract Plan drawn up and signed by the Government of Cameroon and the Corporation, the Corporation is required to meet certain Standards of efficiency and to be self-supporting...That is why we have to be generally very strict on discipline and sanction any manifestation of laxity ... Maximum efforts shall be required of employees so as to continue producing more at lower and lower cost; laxity and laissez faire which are characterized by an alarming rate of absenteeism and uncompleted tasks shall not be tolerated (as cited by Konings, 1995:528).

On 6 January 1990, a meeting was held in Bota, Limbe between the management of the CDC led by Peter Mafany Musonge, General Manager, and the workers represented by various leaders of the Cameroon Trade Union Congress (CTUC). C.P.N. Vewessee represented the employees of the estates in Fako Division, Paul Sako represented Menoua - Dschang, Engsi Victor represented Moungo – Nkongsamba, Mude Andrew represented Meme – Kumba and Majam George Ngala represented Donga-Mantung – Nkambe. NgantchaChamba Emmanuel, the Provincial Delegate of Labour and Social Insurance for the South West Province, attended the meeting as a witness of the deliberations. The said meeting culminated in the signing of the Agreement between Management and the Workers of CDC.

The January 1990 agreement was deemed necessary because in spite of previous measures to fight the crisis, the CDC was still confronted with the "sharp, simultaneous and persistent fall" of the prices of its major crops in the world market leading to "huge" losses and high external debt. The CDC hierarchy nursed the fear that should the Corporation collapse, this would lead "thousands of families into abject misery." It was as a result of this fear that measures were taken to "keep the Corporation in business."[14]

Following the January 1990 agreement, a number of fringe benefits were either reduced or suppressed. For example, workers were

other estates took the increase in task work with a pinch of salt and therefore, such resistance was manifested in a number of strike actions such as that of 3 October 1987. For more details, see Damian Akara's PhD thesis (January 2016) which focuses on female strike actions on the Tole Tea Estate.

[13]ADLSIP, Bu. 134, Vol. IV, CDC General Correspondence, Minutes of Mass Meetings with Workers of Estates/Services of the CDC in Connection with the Economic Crisis, March-August 1987, p.729.

[14]ADLSIB, MEPS/SWP/Bu. 134 Vol. IV, CDC General Correspondence, Agreement between the CDC Management and Workers to Combat the Economic Crisis, 6 January 1990, p. 776.

expected to install their own electricity metres and to pay for their consumption. All estates using generators would have to contribute to the running cost. In this light, Estate Managers were expected to pay FCFA 7,500 monthly while supervisory staff and labourers were charged FCFA 5,000 and FCFA 100 respectively as electricity bill. Besides, all employees living in the Corporation's houses were called upon to pay various amounts per month depending on the grade of the houses. Those in categories 1-3, who were mostly labourers for example, were charged FCFA 1,000 as monthly rent. Those between categories 4 and 6 were to pay FCFA 3,000 (for those residing in Tiko and Bota) and FCFA 2,000 (for those living on other estates). In the domain of health, management staff (categories 10 to 12) were expected to pay FCFA 11,750 as consultation, drugs and hospitalization fee while those below category 7 (supervisors and labourers) were to pay FCFA 2,100 monthly and FCFA 500 at each consultation. Unlike in earlier decisions where labourers who had low wages were exempted from the compulsory saving scheme, it was agreed that those earning between FCFA 00 and FCFA 100,000 would be obliged to save 15 percent of their monthly pay in order to help the Corporation in its recovery effort.[15] The agreement was to take effect as from 1 February 1990 and was expected to last for four years at the end of which the compulsory savings were to be reimbursed. Unlike in the earlier decisions, the compulsory savings were no longer going to attract any interest rate. This became clear when it was stated in the agreement that "these savings would be refunded in full without interest at the time the employee is permanently leaving the Corporation for whatever reason."[16]

In all, the implementation of the combat measures against the economic crisis and the ever-rising addition of stringent measures made the situation repugnant as most labourers encountered lots of difficulties. There was an uneasy calm especially among labourers who started agitating against their plight stemming from the bamboozling conditions. The situation became so parlous that the unions turned against the CDC authorities on grounds that they laid some workers off without a second thought in spite of the sacrifices they had made. On 13 May 1992, for example, the FAWU and MAWU leaders wrote to the labour authorities declaring a collective trade dispute against the CDC management in which they called for an end to the fringe benefits contributions. The union authorities retorted that:

In accepting to make the financial sacrifices spelt out in the 1990 agreement, the workers did so with the understanding that CDC management was not going to reduce the number of workers in the Corporation. As you may not be aware, from May 1991, barely one and a quarter year of the implementation of the agreement, the Corporation embarked on the retrenchment of workers through redundancies and other guises. This action at once calls for the financial sacrifices to stop. Cutting down the labour force is one way of the employer stabilizing her finances and we find it unacceptable for piece-meal redundancies to go alongside the financial contributions.[17]

On 18 May 1992 Ngantcha Chamba Emmanuel, the Provincial Delegate of Labour and Social Insurance for the South West Province, summoned a reconciliatory meeting in his office to resolve the trade dispute between the CDC management and the workers. The CDC management was represented by 5 top management staff led by P. M. Musonge (General Manager) and R.J. Gray (Deputy General Manager). FAWU was represented by C.P.N. Vewessee while 3 Staff Representatives namely, S.S. Massango, O.O. Ayuk, and Daniel E. Tabi also sat in for the workers. The meeting ended in a deadlock because the General Manager of the CDC objected that the issue under discussion was a trade dispute arguing that the trade union had flouted the procedure in declaring a trade dispute.[18] The unions however, accused the CDC authorities for instituting a 3

[15]ADLSIB, MEPS/SWP/Bu. 134 Vol. IV, CDC General Correspondence, Agreement between the CDC Management and Workers to Combat the Economic Crisis, 6 January 1990, pp. 776-780.

[16]Ibid., pp. 778-780.

[17]ADLSIB, MTPS/DPTPS/BU.112, C.D.C- General Correspondence, Andrew K. Mudi and CPN Vewessee, Letter to the Provincial Delegate of Labour, SWP, 13 May 1992, pp. 154-155.

[18]ADLSIB, MTPS/DPTPS/SWP/Bu.112 Vol. I, CDC General Correspondence, Minutes of Meeting Intended to Resolve the Trade Dispute between the Management and Workers of the CDC, 18 May 1992, pp. 88-89.

percent reduction in workers' compulsory savings without their consent leading to violent reaction of labourers on the estates, as was the case in the Missellele Rubber Estate. The unions declared that a strike action would take place as from 18 May 1992 if the issue was not amicably resolved. Various attempts at arriving at a compromise failed leading to a workers' strike action which lasted from 21 to 26 May 1992.[19] Following the strike, the CDC authorities were forced to review the 1990 agreement through a number of amendments. For example, there was to be a 24 percent reduction in medical cost while the employees were to enjoy free water and accommodation once more (Konings, 1998:163).

In the midst of the prevailing circumstances, the CDC had to look for other outlets to beef up its desperate effort for survival. In 1992 the government managed to secure FCFA 7 billion loan from France to help the CDC get on its feet. This however, led to increasing French control over matters affecting the Corporation which attracted resentment within management circles as well as among labourers. In the midst of this polemic, the CDC and COMDEV[20] signed an agreement in 1992 in which the latter was to take over administration of the tea estates for ten years as an autonomous enterprise and to pay FCFA 80 as royalties per kilogramme of tea sold (Konings, 1995:528). Though the tea sector was privatized ten years later, a larger part of the Corporation managed to weather the storm of the crisis amidst daunting challenges unlike other corporations in Cameroon in particular and Central Africa as a whole.

The scourging heat of the economic crisis that gripped the African continent had a precarious impact on various economic sectors and forced them to bow to privatization as an alternative for their survival. According to the World Bank's Private Provision of Infrastructure Data Base (as cited by Nellis, 2005:10), between 1991 and 2001 over 2,216 economic undertakings in Africa had fallen into the hands of private operators. After the manufacturing industry which counted 675 privatized undertakings, for example, the agro-industrial sector registered 557 cases. In fact, the agriculture, agro-industry and fisheries sector suffered immensely from government neglect. Governments' share of equity took a nose dive from 79.5 percent to 1.6 percent during the said period. Labour inputs had dwindled because of the governments' lack of commitment over them in various parts of Africa.

In the case of Cameroon, a number of enterprises including agro-industries which could hardly gather a resilient momentum in the face of the crisis forced the government to hand them to local and/or foreign private investors. For example, in 1996, HEVECAM, a rubber producing company, was privatized and the government retained only 10 percent of the shares. In 1998, CAMSUCO, a sugar producing company, was given out to private investors without the government retaining any percentage of the shares. Meanwhile, SOCAPALM, producing rubber, was sold out in 1999 with the government keeping only 10 percent of the shares. By 2002, the government owned only 14.9 percent; private foreign investors owned 58.1 percent while private local investors kept 27 percent of the shares of privatized undertakings in Cameroon (Alain and Taylor, 2016:76-77).

CONCLUSION

The economic crisis that hit the African continent, especially the Central African Region, in the 1980s had far reaching consequences. Given that most of the countries relied on the exportation of agricultural raw materials which suffered very low and fluctuating prices in the world market meant that they had to suffer profusely. Many business undertakings particularly agro-industries like the CDC bore the ravaging impact as they could hardly function in full capacity due to an abysmal decrease in their running capital. The situation became absurd and put the companies at the brink of collapse and the future of their employees in jeopardy. While most companies resigned themselves to their fate and could only find solace in privatization, the case of the CDC

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[19] ADLSIB, MTPS/DPTPS/SWP/Bu.112 Vol. I, CDC General Correspondence, Minutes of Meeting Intended to Resolve the Trade Dispute between the Management and Workers of the CDC, 18 May 1992, pp. 90-92.

[20] COMDEV refers to Common Wealth Development Corporation. It was one time involved in the financing and management of the CDC.

was much different. In the CDC, the employees became the backbone on which the Corporation leaned on for survival. As such, they accepted to make inexorable sacrifices to rescue their employer from a humpty dumpty crash. Though the sacrifices were painful and at times provoked conflict between the trade unions and employees on the one hand and CDC management on the other, the role of the labourers can hardly be underrated or disremembered as far as the resurgence of the CDC is concerned.

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