

Cameroon: Elder-driven, Community-based Initiatives Like You've Never Seen Before!

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We just returned from the most incredible trip of our lives. We spent nearly 3 weeks visiting Cameroon at the invitation of Francis Njuakom, Founder/Executive Director of Community Development Volunteers for Technical Assistance (CDVTA), Cameroon's leading organization serving Elders in the North West English-speaking part of the country.

After a long flight from Atlanta, through Paris, and arriving in Douala, we were met at the airport by Francis and staff driver, Sylvester. Once we settled into our comfortable hotel, they took us for a meal at a nearby restaurant where we engaged in lively conversation. We marveled at the fact that we had only met Francis and his lovely wife, Rosie, two months earlier, and here we were in Cameroon!

The next day, we sat out on our 7-hour SUV journey to Bamenda, where Francis and his family live and the CDVTA office is located. We passed several small towns along the way. We stopped at a fruit stand where we sampled the best pineapple that has ever crossed our lips. It was freshly cut, and had a sweet, mild taste...not like the acidic pineapple we have always eaten. We got our first hint at the effects of the conflict between the Francophone majority (French-speaking), and Anglophone minority (English-speaking). The roads were in bad shape in the Francophone part of the drive, but as we entered the Anglophone area, the roads went from bad to much worse, and in many areas barely passable. This region has largely been ignored and neglected by the Francophone majority, with development and maintenance of roads being a prime example. It is the dry season in Cameroon and there is a tremendous amount of dust in the air. It covers everything. Many buildings, cars and even vegetation were brown from the dust.

As we approached the CDVTA office, we were pleasantly surprised to see a large banner welcoming us to Cameroon! As we exited the SUV, the entire 9-member staff enthusiastically greeted us. They sang us a welcome song! We were so moved by the warm and genuine show of affection. After introductions, we were taken on a tour of the small space where their office is located, just above a bakery with inviting smells. We had a brief meeting with the staff where we thanked them for the warm welcome and expressed our excitement at spending the next few weeks with them.



The following day, we had an extended meeting with the CDVTA staff including the chair of the Board of Trustees. Francis and staff gave us a detailed summary of the organization's history, achievements, and challenges. They reviewed the strategic plan and advocacy framework. Walter presented information on person-centered care & services, nurturing the spirit of Elders (based on the Principles of the Eden Alternative), and basic information about dementia. David spoke about our new consulting business, WD International, whose focus is on staff development through coaching, mentoring, and leadership development. He shared some of the tools/information we are using to develop and engage leaders throughout organizations. It was all very well received by the staff.

Over the past 20 years, CDVTA has been intentional in supporting Elder rights and improving their lives through community-based initiatives. One such initiative was the creation of over 300 Elder (Old People's) Clubs. Before CDVTA, Elders were often isolated, lonely and not engaged. In an attempt to combat the isolation, CDVTA organized "Old People's Clubs" that are now led by and for the Elders. A village may have multiple clubs of approximately 50 members each. Each Elder Club wears their own distinct clothing pattern of brightly colored fabric. In addition to staff support, the Elders are assisted by over 450 community volunteers (an average of two volunteers serve each club). These volunteers must be residents of the village, speak the local language, and be elected by the Elders. To be selected by the Elders to be a volunteer is a huge honor. Volunteers insist on saving their money to purchase their uniforms, which is a big deal. We thought we understood what Elder-driven, community-based services was all about, however the Elders, volunteers, and staff demonstrated how it should actually work.

The highlight of our time was the actual visits to the most remote villages of the North West region. The villages were located several hours from Bamenda, therefore, we experienced several long days of travel to reach the villages. The roads were very rough for lengthy periods of time. The trips were rigorous and physically challenging. CDVTA field staff met us closer to the villages with the motorcycles in case the roads were not passable, they could take us via motorcycle. It was hot and there was a lot of dust from the roads and many times we would need to leave the windows closed to be protected from the dust.



These villages rarely receive guests. Nothing could have prepared us for the reception we received. At each village, we were greeted by large crowds of villagers outside their village, who sang and danced while escorting us via a festive parade into the center of the community. Plant necklaces symbolizing blessings were placed on our necks and we were led into the village with peace plants. Typically, the "program" included greetings from the president of the Old People's Club and greetings from some village dignitaries. The Club presidents recited a list of village challenges that needed attention. Next, Francis addressed the crowd engaging them in singing and dancing. Consistently, Francis engaged the village through song and his superior oratory skill. His charismatic manner was inspiring. Lastly, we were invited to speak.

We shared that we loved our grandmothers who both lived to be very old. We continued that in our work we believe Elders should be honored and respected, not just in the US, but anywhere in the world. They were especially excited to see David, a black man from the US, and were even more thrilled to learn that 30% of his DNA was from Cameroon/Congo. Walter shared that he was obviously not a cousin, however asked to be adopted, which they joyously accepted as well. At each village we visited, we were given some gift of clothing, handmade carrying bags, food, and at one village, 3 live chickens! They wanted us to feel welcome. After each village meeting, we were invited to eat. The CDVTA field staff



directed us on the food and drink that would be best for us. Often it included rice, chicken, and raw carrots.

Mostly, the villages consisted of Elders and their grandchildren. There were few middle-aged individuals. Many of the middle generation had to leave the villages to work and some have died of AIDS. The Elders were very concerned about education for their grandchildren and wanted to ensure they stayed in school. Many schools do not have latrines, so girls often stop going to school as they reach adolescence. Because they no longer attend school, they are expected to get married and start families. Part of the work of CDVTA is to support the construction of better school buildings and constructing latrines at the schools. They are committed to providing children a safe, private place to go to the bathroom. There is a shortage of teachers and the average teacher earns \$200 a month (\$1,800 for the year). They are seeking funds to support more teachers in the schools.

Being treated as royalty was overwhelming. Since these remote villages do not often have visitors, they are excited to see and hear from their guests. People who had very little in material possessions were so incredibly generous to us. While they may have been very poor by American standards, they were rich in joy and wellbeing. The way they express what we call the “domains of wellbeing” is one area we want to better understand and interpret in order to share with Elders in the US. This level of Elder engagement that we observed and experienced was due to CDVTA’s long-time work in the villages. Some of the “livelihood” projects include gardening, farming, making soap, medicinal ointments, bee-keeping and raising goats. These projects not only provide for the villagers but can serve to raise money for the Elders and their families. CDVTA field staff regularly meet with the volunteers and the Elders. They provide education and inspiration. Also, they bring supplies such as seeds, watering cans, hoes, etc. for the Elders to garden.



One of our more profound encounters was with a village Chief (we only met three Chiefs on all the village visits). We were granted an audience with him. He graciously allowed two Elder women to join our conversation, which is not normal for a Chief to do. The Chief was in his late 80s and had been Chief over 25 years, after the death of his father. We asked the women about their daily routines. It consisted mostly of working in the fields and gardens, as well as taking care of their grandchildren. The only question that the Chief asked was about his health. He stated that he was experiencing some forgetfulness and confusion. He wanted to know what we could tell him about that! The question took our breath away.



You see, dementia is not understood (or even discussed) in this country. Most villagers believe that it is a curse, a punishment from God. Others believe that the person living with dementia is possessed by evil spirits because of bad things they did in their lives. There is such stigma that families often hide their loved one so no one will find out. Many times, Elders with dementia are either expected to be kept out of sight in the huts or even sent into the woods until they die.

We told the Chief that “as we get older, sometimes we start having trouble with our hearts, or with our knees. Sometimes, things can happen in our brains, and we can start to forget or get confused. It does not mean you did anything wrong, it just means you might need a little more support”. This was a very emotional moment. We held it together until we got back to the SUV. Given current attitudes about “forgetfulness and confusion”, it was very brave of him to admit his issue, especially in front of the two Elder women.



Another exciting moment occurred while visiting the Dorothy York Senior Center, the first such Center of its kind in Cameroon. It is not like a Center in the US, it is a small house-like structure for Elders to have meetings, host events, receive information, and one day soon use technology to make connections outside their village. It will serve as the office of the new community nurse. The Center was named in memory of the mother of Jack York, founder of *Its Never 2 Late*. During this visit, Francis announced the hiring of the very first community nurse in Cameroon, which will advance

the mission of CDVTA “to promote Elderly friendly communities where Elders live fulfilled lives”. We, as WD International, are proud to lead the fundraising efforts to cover the first year’s expenses for the nurse. These funds for the first year are being collected from donations. We will continue to secure funds for a total of 3 years (\$7,500 year one, \$8,000 year two, and \$8,500 year three for a total of \$24,000).



Lillian is the name of the new community nurse. She was very emotional over the announcement. As the first community nurse in the country, she is doing something that has never been done. Potentially, her impact is huge in that she will be touching the lives of many Elders and their families. Along with a focus on wellness, as well as, welcoming Elders to the senior center, she will make home visits. Due to her status as a community nurse, she will be an effective educator. This year, we will create a network of colleagues who will provide her with technical and peer support. In addition, she will be

provided information on dementia which she can use to educate the villagers, especially the volunteers, and move to de-stigmatize it.

We have witnessed first-hand, that CDVTA operates with a great deal of integrity. We know that thousands of lives are being touched by their work. They have been very intentional about making sure all their work is Elder-driven and have focused especially on empowering women. Their work has a wide reach including building schools and latrines, helping bring running water and electricity to villages, as well as, preparing and empowering Elders to register to vote and advocate for themselves.



Due to the critical need for support to continue their work, we have volunteered to serve as the liaisons to connect individuals and organizations in the US with CDVTA projects. The work in the US for CDVTA is called **Eldercare Cameroon**. We have developed a living document (that will be edited as appropriate) that details large and small projects that individuals and organizations can support. Many groups have asked about partnering with a village. Their intent is to support the village at various levels. We are happy to share the list of available projects and provide more details on our experience with all interested people.

Having experienced the work of CDVTA firsthand, and seen, heard, and tasted the country of Cameroon, we are committed to continued learning and sharing with the people of the North West region. We will return next year, and the year after, and so on. We invite you to be a part of this vital work. We appreciate the connection with the Global Ageing Network to this project. We trust Eldercare Cameroon will just be the first of many countries and connections where projects are initiated to enhance the lives of Elders.

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