Accounting for around a third of the 1996 GDP of US$ 9 billion (second only to oil), and almost three-fourths of all employment, agriculture is a dominant sector of the Cameroonian economy. Also, as in most African countries, poverty in Cameroon is concentrated in rural areas, with more than 80 percent (approximately 5.5 million) of all poor people living in such areas. The Government of Cameroon’s objectives include the need to create a sectoral environment favorable to reviving agricultural production; ensure food security; increase farm incomes by improving productivity and reducing the costs of production; and render agricultural products competitive in domestic and international markets. It is committed to progressively liberalizing the marketings of inputs and traditional export commodities, and privatizing agricultural development activities. Consequently, inasmuch as poverty reduction and economic growth are at the core of the World Bank’s Country Assistance Strategy (CAS) for Cameroon, they necessitate a strategic focus on the agricultural and rural sectors.

Substantial commitments by donors since 1967 (including more than US$ 2 billion by the World Bank) have failed to produce a discernible impact though, after a long period of stagnation, there has been some agricultural growth in recent years as a result of the supply response induced by the devaluation of the CFA franc. In combination with the government’s delicate financial situation, because of declining oil revenues and a large debt servicing burden, this suggests the need for greater selectivity in public investments. Thus, in addition to poverty reduction, the other key elements of the Bank’s CAS include the need to reinforce the devaluation-induced supply response and foster conditions conducive to private sector expansion, so that economic development becomes less dependent on public sector investments.

The Bank’s CAS has recommended that public expenditures (from both national and donor sources) concentrate on a few priority activities, so as not to dissipate their impact. Acknowledging the soundness of this, the government has undertaken a participatory process for identifying priorities for public expenditures in the agricultural sector, with the involvement of national and local stakeholders. By involving policymakers and beneficiaries, the process was expected to not only lead to better identification of priority programs and
problems, but also engender greater ownership around the resulting activities which might be undertaken by the public sector. Facilitated by the World Bank, the process was implemented first at the national level, and then separately for each of Cameroon's ten provinces. This was considered necessary because of the diversity among provinces in terms of such factors as the relative importance of crops, and the planned decentralization.

The Process

A three-day workshop was held in 1996 at the national level, with the main focus being on prioritizing potential public sector programs, both of an investment and institutional nature. Totaling around two dozen, the participants comprised senior policymakers from the principal ministries and departments responsible for rural development (agriculture, livestock, research, extension, transport, infrastructure, finance, industrial development and commerce, land, etc.); managers from the private and parastatal sectors (CDCC, SODECAO, etc.); and representatives of a number of national and regional producer associations. Similar workshops were subsequently organized in each of the provinces at which, while national and provincial officials were also represented, about half of the participants consisted of farmers. The focus at the provincial level was on prioritizing commodities and the constraints affecting their production, given that the rural economy in Cameroon is largely crop-based. Relying on the judgments of the participants, the priority-setting process utilized a scoring method based on weighted criteria.

Prioritization Criteria

The prioritization criteria agreed upon by the participants generally conformed with the objectives espoused by the government. In particular, criteria focusing on increasing farm incomes and food security featured at the national as well as all the provincial workshops. Improving the quality of life featuring in eight provinces, and employment generation in four provinces, were the other criteria common among provinces; agro-processing, environment protection and rational resource utilization were applied in one province each. Although the overlapping nature especially of the three principal criteria -- increasing farm incomes and food security and improving the quality of life -- was recognized, the workshop participants considered each important enough in itself to merit inclusion separately.

In terms of the weights assigned by the participants, increasing farm incomes came out to be the top criterion nationally and in 5 of the 10 provinces (it tied for first place with food security in one of these); it was second in 3 of the remaining 5 provinces, and third in the other two. Tying with increasing productivity for second place nationally, food security emerged in first place in 6 of the provinces, second in 3, and third in the remaining one; it was the top criterion in all the northern provinces where agriculture is accompanied by considerable rainfall-induced risk. Improving the quality of life also emerged as an important criterion in the case of the provinces, ranking second in 3, third in 4 and fourth in the remaining one, of the 8
provinces where it was considered. Employment generation ranked second in one province, third in one, and fourth in two.

Three other criteria used at the provincial level to prioritize commodities were concerned with questions of land tenure, establishing inheritance, and social prestige, but these typically ranked below those relating to improving incomes, food security, and the general quality of life.

**Prioritization of National Programs**

The participants at the national workshop identified 13 programs for potential public sector intervention, and evaluated each against the defined criteria. On the basis of their scores, the programs have been classified into three groups, each denoting a different level of inferred priority (Table 1). Agricultural credit is deemed to belong in a group by itself as the leading priority. Revealing a concern with financing production at the farm level, it emerged as a primary constraint in individual provinces as well.

**Table 1: Prioritization of Programs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First level</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural Credit</td>
<td>8599</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Second level</th>
<th>Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Road and communication infrastructure (evacuation of produce)</td>
<td>7606</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extension and research</td>
<td>7501</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Input supply</td>
<td>7344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agro-processing</td>
<td>7123</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural organization</td>
<td>7073</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social infrastructure and services (drinking water, irrigation, health services, rural electrification, etc.)</td>
<td>6823</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender concerns</td>
<td>6651</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Third level:
Legislation and institutional reform 6110
(agrarian reform, security, quality control, etc.)

Agricultural Statistics 5700

Protection of the environment 5666

The second-level priorities include programs that not only facilitate production, but also its sale and utilization. They further include programs that empower farmers and improve their bargaining capacity (e.g. for buying inputs, selling produce and obtaining credit); increase land and labor productivity; and promote the needs of women, who account for a considerable portion of the labor force in Cameroonian agriculture, but are often neglected by development programs.

The programs comprising the third level of priorities are of an institutional and supporting nature. Their lower scores should not be construed to mean that they are considered unimportant. It probably reflects the fact that their benefits in terms of production and incomes are less apparent.

Provincial Commodity priorities

In each province, the principal crop and livestock commodities (including fish) were evaluated against the agreed-upon criteria by the workshop participants; the crop and livestock commodities were treated separately as they involve different ministries. The resulting rankings are shown in Table 2 (those for the country as a whole were obtained by averaging the ranks of individual commodities across provinces).

As policymakers are frequently interested in using programs and policies to maximize particular objectives, Table 3 presents the top five commodities in terms of the two main criteria applied in the prioritization process, increasing farm incomes and improving food security.

Commodity Constraints

Not only is it important to know what the priority commodities are, but also the constraints affecting them. Undertaken at the provincial level, the process to identify commodity constraints covered oil palm, cocoa, coffee, cereals and roots and tubers as groups, fish, cattle, poultry and pork.
Conforming to the program priorities identified at the national level (Table 2), the lack of credit emerged as the main perceived constraint in the case of the industrial crops (oil palm, cocoa and coffee).

Other important constraints identified in the case of the industrial crops included low prices and the inaccessibility of land for all three crops, phytosanitary problems particularly for cocoa and coffee, and inadequate extension for oil palm.

While not as severe as in the case of the industrial crops, the lack of credit was perceived to be an important constraint in the case of cereals and -- to a lesser extent -- root and tuber crops as well.

For cereals, the lack of credit ranked as the highest constraint in one province (out of six), while high input costs (which have significance for credit) did so in another. Pests and disease and inadequate extension ranked first in one province each, and the vagaries of weather in two provinces (in the north); poor soils were also identified as an important constraint in several provinces. In the case of roots and tubers, the unavailability of cuttings and other planting materials ranked first in four provinces (again out of six), while the obsolescence of tools and techniques and the incidence of pests and disease were first in the remaining two provinces; the high costs and problems associated with storage, preservation and processing also emerged as significant constraints. All these constraints have implications for research and extension.

The constraints affecting cattle and small ruminants were considered in three northern provinces (the Extreme North, North and Adamaoua). They suggest a preoccupation with problems relating to the availability of feed and water, with the lack of pastures ranking first in two provinces and the lack and high cost of feeds (and other inputs) in the third; the lack of drinking water ranked second in the only province in which it was considered (the Extreme North). Concerns relating to animal health and the lack of drugs also ranked relatively high. These constraints have implications not only for veterinary services, but again research and extension as well.

In the case of poultry and pork, agricultural credit, research, extension and feed supply emerged as key priorities. Constraints relating to the incidence of disease and weak producer organizations were also viewed as being relatively important in a number of provinces.

For fish (marine and freshwater fishing as well as fish farming) financial constraints -- with significance for the provision of credit -- tended to dominate, directly or indirectly.

**Conclusion**

The results conform with logic, and the government's and the Bank's strategic focus. They are also consistent with the government's and the Bank's declared emphasis on facilitating the development of the private sector, inasmuch as agricultural credit, road infrastructure, input supply, agro-processing and rural organization emerged among the chief program priorities at
the national level. The program priorities implied by the prioritization of commodity-related constraints at the provincial level support those arrived at the national level.

In terms of individual programs, there is no gainsaying the importance for agricultural development of credit, which came out to be the top priority. Currently, the availability of credit in rural areas is predominantly based on informal arrangements or on that provided by traders for input purchases, as the poor past record of the parastatal credit agencies has led to their dissolution. The best that can probably be done by the Bank under the present circumstances is to assist in initiating a pilot operation, with the emphasis on developing exemplary practices for mobilizing rural savings, determining interest rates, supervising borrowers, and securing high repayment rates to maintain financial viability.

The programs deemed to comprise the second group of priorities (after credit) consist of road and communication infrastructure, agricultural extension and research, input supply, agro-processing, social services (water supply, health, etc.), and gender concerns. The Bank's portfolio in the health and infrastructure sectors includes programs for rural water supply and health. Similarly, the agricultural portfolio has a major program in support of extension and research, which is about to enter its second phase. A particular focus of the extension component in the second phase will be on the needs of women farmers. In the area of input supply, the extension department has begun to establish linkages with private sector companies to supply inputs (seeds, pesticides, fertilizers, etc.) in rural areas, and these will be further strengthened during the second phase. Also, in the second phase, the integration of livestock extension into the agricultural extension program should lead to an improved focus on the problems affecting livestock production.

The inadequacy of the rural road infrastructure to link farmers with markets, nevertheless, remains a legitimate concern. About 80 percent of the total rural road network of 28,000 kilometers is considered to be in a state of disrepair as a result of the lack of maintenance; the poor state of rural roads generally is also confirmed by field visits. While the Bank-supported Transport Sector Project has a rural roads component, it has concentrated mostly on primary roads. As such, a separate project, concerned particularly with building maintenance capacity, may be warranted for rural roads. A project may also be justified in the area of rural organization with close links to the extension program. It would help to empower farmers against output buyers and input sellers, inasmuch as the lack of producer organizations for marketing purposes was identified as an important constraint in the case of several commodities. These organizations could also be used as vehicles for channeling formal credit, and for contractual extension and research as those services become more demand driven.

The commodity priorities identified in the case of individual provinces have immediate significance for the extension and research programs. In each province, the program of the extension service and of the provincial research center/station should concentrate on a few top ranking commodities, to achieve a quick impact. Supported by further diagnosis, the prioritized constraints should be used to guide these programs.

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