

HISTORY OF MBONWEH WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION

In the 1988, one woman (Mrs Dorothy Atabong a retired community development officer) went around and invited a group of women leaders in Meme and Fako divisions of the South West Province of Cameroon. 16 women met in a Catholic Mission Hall. She explained a vision.

Cameroon is made up of two hundred and more tribes with as many different dialects. Almost all these tribes have similar traditions about the rights and duties of the woman and the girl child. A girl child is a source of income to the family because whoever marries her will pay a dowry. After the payment of the dowry, she becomes the property of the husband. It also follows that she becomes the food provider, the home maker, the child bearer. If the child is bad the , the community blames the mother. The woman cultivates the land and produces the food crops to feed the family while the man marries more wives entertain his friends.

As a result, the actual burden of poverty is most evident on the woman and the child.

It also follows that if the family had two children, a boy and a girl, it is most likely that the father would prefer the boy to school and keep the girl to do the farm work with the mother in preparation for the time when she will go to her marital home. Girl child education was scare and so most of the women remain illiterate.

The vision bearer believed that even though 80% of adult women where illiterate, they were strong and intelligent. She believed that given opportunity in sensitization and skill training these women would raised their self esteem, get involved in income generating activity, create wealth, change their lives and put the girl child on an equal level with the boy child. She believed that if the woman had the income the girl child will be given equal opportunity in education and for life achievement.

These women came to a common belief that the agenda for change will not be carried out automatically and that unless women themselves convey their message and actively participate in the process of change, little will be accomplished.

Mbonweh Women's Development Association Cameroon was born on 2nd March 1988 by this group of women leaders. MBONWEH (MEANS "UNITY")

It was dedicated to building a world that ensures equality and justice for all. They defined justice to include economic, political and social injustices that has gender equality and its core. Mbonweh Women envisioned a world were no woman or child is



abused, poor, illiterate or marginalized: where women have full and equal participation in process that ensure their health, well-being and economics independence and where women have the freedom to define their lives, future and reach their full potential.



Mrs. Felicia (70 years old) takes care of her 5 grand children through her firewood sale.

The Mission:

On this day, this women leaders where challenge to conceive a programme that would empowered the women so as to enable them meet their numerous challenges

- Firstly, women set out to create consciousness-raising groups in which the women would meet in small and congenial gatherings which may encourage them to overcome their limitations, express themselves and share experiences, learn about their rights and raise their self esteem .
- Secondly they set out to create opportunities for education and training, adult literacy, skill training , in initiation and management of income generating activities and training in better agriculture methods. The leaders must also be trained, must be equipped with the necessary know-how to lead the others successfully into this new era. They searched for leadership training opportunities. This education and training component was started with contributions from the women's leaders.
- Thirdly, women decided to create a Revolving Loan Scheme. This was to enable the women start up something after training. The women revolving loan scheme was initially set up using the personal savings of the founder members. They (126 women) saved 470.000cfa = 940.00USD within the first one year.
- Fourthly, they also agreed that the children and youths from these poor families must be cart erred for. Children/Youths are the future of the nation. Catering for them would mean cutting the cycle of poverty. They decided that they would

eventually create programmes for the development of under privileged youths and children.

- 1992: The founder/visioneer was a leader in the World Union of Catholic Women's Organisations (WUCWO). Using her connections with the catholic women, she got a grant of 2.6 million fcfa from CEBEMO for the first training of 60 women leaders.



Facilitator at 1st Workshop/1992

Mbonweh approached the Pan African Institute for Development (PAIDWA) for assistance in the conception and execution of this first workshop which set the pace for the establishment and growth of the organization. An additional funding of 5million fcfa from the same organization in the same year enabled Mbonweh Loan scheme to take root.

1995: Mbonweh approached the German inter-government technical assistance GTZ for organizational techniques and its field staff assisted in writing up the first Mbonweh constitution which is being used up till date though with modifications

1997: Mbonweh was registered as Common Initiative Group and as NGO.

Mbonweh met Mrs Elango of Cameroon Gatsby Trust (CGT) (an arm of the British Gatsby Charitable Foundation). This started a relationship which enabled Mbonweh to increase its loan portfolio by a yearly loan from CGT.

1998: Wherever Mbonweh went, the Catholic mission halls were used for meetings and workshops. The founder's house was used as a temporal office with the executive working part time and as volunteers.

Mbonweh opened and equipped Mbonweh Head Office in Mutengene in 1998 with the aid of Cameroun Gatsby Trust founder Mr. Lawrence Cockrof from London.

2000: Mbonweh lost its founder at a training session in April 2000. Mrs. Dorothy Atabong collapsed while delivering a lecture at the Pan African Institute for Development Buea (PAIDWA) and died the next day 4th march 2000.

This was a great shock for the organization.

The organization survived due to a number of reasons:

Firstly Mrs. Dorothy Atabong personally was a very intelligent, honest, hardworking and committed leader. She was able to transfer the vision to her followers very effectively. When she delegated duties she expected thorough execution and would not accept any performance less than excellence. In this she unconsciously trained her successor.

Secondly, Mbonweh was built as a democratic organization with elected executive and all women having equal rights to vote and be voted to office.

Mbonweh office purchased its first computer with the assistance from SWISS League of Catholic Women one of the late presidents contacts in WUCWO (World Union of Catholic Organizations.)

2002: Most Mbonweh members are rural women food crop farmers . From foundation Mbonweh had identified as priority the training of its members on better agricultural methods. The farmer women faced problems of Rain washed soil, declining soil fertility and low crop yield. Mbonweh registered to become member of NECOFA (Network of Eco-farming Organisations) Africa, trained two members and started the Eco-farming project for rural women.

Mbonweh had also established a good relationship with PAID/WA. As a result four Mbonweh leaders were enrolled for training at the Pan African Institute for Development (PAID/WA).



The Unique educational Project was created in 2002. A comprehensive educational opportunity for poor children, orphans and Youths from poor families. This project was blessed with funding for construction of two buildings from the British High Commission and the German Embassy respectively in 2004.

2003: Mbonweh contacted, registered and became member society of the Associated Country Women of the World (ACWW). This enabled us to acquire funding for the Women's Educational Programmes for the next two years.

2005: Mbonweh contacted Broederlijk Delen a Belgian organization with representative office in Yaoundé - Cameroon. With this partner Mbonweh was able to expand its geographical location. Before now, Mbonweh activities covered Meme and Fako Division of the South West Region and part of Littoral Region. With this funding, Mbonweh expanded to Lebialem division and Mbo area of the Kupe-Muanenguba division and Santchou in Western province. These areas are very enclave villages with thousands of poor farming women.

Showing BD representative some of Mbonweh Women's Activities at contact visit



2008: Mbonweh organization has grown in membership and in needs.

Mbonweh had designed Three services from its origin:

- **Educational Programmes for Women:**

Through conferences, workshops, seminars and short courses. Social and political awareness is raised, as well as discussion on issues such as women's rights, health issues HIV/AIDS, domestic violence and political process. Women are taught: Organisational and business skills, such as budgeting, small business conception, finance management, small industry agricultural methods, marketing etc.



Yam Seedling Multiplication Training



Training on Mushroom Cultivation

There is great concentration on agriculture. In Agriculture, the women were trained on such skills as production of Manure and insecticides using local materials, cultivation of new crops in

new areas, seed multiplication, food preservation, food processing, and marketing. This is because agriculture is the dominant activity for women involving 70% of the Mbonweh women.



Training on Snail Rearing



Food Packaging Exercise

Further work is needed to help each woman better understand how to make their business more profitable, so that these profits can not only cover their living costs, but also provide working capital each year to enable the business to grow. The aim is to enable these women to be 'weaned off' relying on loans each year, thereby leaving more funds available for newer (and poorer) members to borrow.

Health education is an integral part of all Mbonweh workshops. Mbonweh like any other organization has been greatly affected by the devastating effects HIV/AIDS. As a result, Mbonweh has developed resource persons for education and HIV/AIDS preventions and recently home based care for HIV/AIDS infected families.

General hygiene and sanitation, food nutrition and reproductive health are all parts of Mbonweh education and training.



A skills training project for youths



(Photo: Training in vegetable processing for preservation)

Education and training workshops are held regularly in all sub-regions, with hundreds of women attending. These workshops are tailored to suit the local needs. This ensures that those women who then move on to apply for finance from the micro-credit scheme are well-prepared and more likely to make a profit from their activities and therefore repay the loan with few problems.

(Some Mbonweh Activities in Pictures)



Selling Home made palm oil



Selling embroidered Dresses

- **Educational Programmes for Children and Youths**

Mbonweh women realized that the children of these poor families are the most underprivileged. Many of the children can not complete the full primary school course. Most school drop-outs, delinquents, street children abused children come from this group to become youths in crisis: Prostitutes, drug addicts, bandits.

- A group of Mbonweh women in year 2001 created a primary school and care home for poor and street children in the Fako coastal region in Batoke. The school was built to serve the local community who had no access to affordable, quality education. The school is founded on a 'child-centred' ethos, where class sizes are kept at low levels (max of 35 pupils in each), and the fees are less than half what a Government run school would charge. Many of these children's mothers are Mbonweh women.
- This dream project came into reality in 2004 with the assistance of the British High commission and the German embassy whose funding completed two structures. This project has also receive major assistance from volunteers especially Mrs. Wendy Saker who founded the child sponsorship programme and Miss Merit Heitanen who greatly improved on the child sponsorship program by enrolling 53 children who could have never attend basic primary education in 2007. This project appreciation goes to other volunteers such as Miss Laura Johnston, Miss Helen Bishop, Miss Jenny Zaidi whose assistance would remain in the history of the project.

The project presently providing high quality basic education for 406 underprivileged children enrolled in 2010. A vocational department has been envisioned and the women are searching for funding partners to make this a reality.



The British High Commissioner Projects Director with Government



German Ambassador at Inauguration of Six Classrooms/ Feb 2005

The anecdotal evidence we have, suggests that those women who attend our training workshops, really value the information they are given and the practical teaching methods used, particularly where the majority of them are illiterate. This arms them with information which helps them to develop their lives and their families.

They are able to better judge what activity will provide the best income for them and enable them to repay the loan whilst creating an income for them, their immediate family and their extended family. It provides them with self-respect, self-confidence, independence and earns them the respect of their husbands, their families and their communities.

They grow from being just a reproductive person to a productive person, who becomes the responsible head of the family, providing for their children's education, up-bringing, nutrition and medical needs. The community spirit within each group and between groups is also extremely positive.

The organization has through the educational programs for children and youths provided foundation education and training for more that 1000 youths who are now gainfully employed or pursuing higher education for a better life in the future.

The whole organization has a supportive ethos, with no one member feeling isolated or unable to turn to others for help. In a country with widespread poverty, domestic violence, rape, high HIV/Aids prevalence and expensive and prohibitive education systems, this supportive atmosphere is essential. The strength of our organization stems from our organizations steadfast believe in an individuals ability to make a difference in the world. We help them to move from extreme poverty to self –sufficiency. We try to provide women, children and youths with knowledge, tools, and resources not other wise available to them.