



RESEARCH ARTICLE

UP-STEPPING THE VALUE OF THE NEEDY IN TWENTY YEARS: THE CASE OF THE CIRCLE OF FRIENDS OF CAMEROON (CERAC) IN SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT 1995-2015.

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Abstract

Just after independence, the young African states saw the need to construct their nations to fit the political, economic and socio-cultural realities of the changing times. But such construction would be very beneficial when each constituent of the societal stratum was taken into consideration. As much political values were fast determined and constructed, those of economy and socials were often tottering and sluggishly picking up owing to the educational, health, purchasing power of most of the populations. The most frustrating element thereto, was generational gap, with most of the growing peoples quit young and vulnerably weakened my undetermined lifespan, caused in the main by the proliferation of deadly diseases, disabilities, meek purchasing command, and so on. Since the state of Cameroon could not unilaterally do all, other conscious non-state actors decided to come in to help. It was in this light after the liberation law of 1990; CERAC came to be and stepped in to help the state in closing the vulnerable-development gap in Cameroon. Thus, the central contention of this paper is that CERAC (philanthropic by itself) has participated (and continues to do so) in an indisputable manner in surmounting and/or resolving socio-economic challenges and problems in Cameroon since 1995. Consequently it, from a historic-feminist approach, investigates and analysis the evolutionary value of its humanitarian activities, it's adaptable, procedural and modification consonants within the confines of the Cameroon socio-economic variable contexts and needs of its beneficiary. This study also shows that CERAC has become a reliable working tool for the empowerment of woman, the promotion of basic human rights, value of formal education, vocational training, health, farming and other self-sustaining activities.

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Introduction:-

Articles 28 and 29 (paragraph 2) of the African (Banjul) Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights state:

Every individual shall have the duty to respect and consider his fellow beings without discrimination, and to maintain relations aimed at promoting, safeguarding and reinforcing mutual respect and tolerance [...]. The

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individual shall also have the duty to serve his national community by placing his physical and intellectual abilities at its service.¹

These articles presented each individual not only as a beneficiary but also as a promoter of concrete actions geared towards contributing to the emergence of prerogatives and other privileges destined for human beings. It is perhaps important to say here that those with a philanthropic value and posture can realize this in an outshouting form with relative impact. As the disparity between the rich and poor grows in most parts of the world, interest in philanthropy is also growing. Such an occurrence, upon imaginal reflection, seems to mirror the movement of soul, one that longs to elicit connection. The roots of philanthropy, starting with the word itself, are deeply embedded in soul, for philanthropy, it turns out, comes from the Greek word *philanthropos*, which means “the love of humankind” (American Heritage Dictionary: 1318).

Being a philanthropist, therefore, implies having a love for one’s fellow human beings and a desire to promote their best welfare. Peter Karoff, founder of Philanthropic Initiative, agrees: “The world is at a pivotal point, poised between a downward spiral and extraordinary renewal” (Stanley, 1956: 23). Ironically, this movement downward also reflects the renewing movement of soul, for soul is not all transcendent goodness and light but ambiguously complex like humanity itself. Even so, the challenges are real, and if philanthropy is going to engender true soul-making, it must reflect the loving complexity of soul. Aware of this complexity of the soul, more and more women are choosing to work for change through the medium of philanthropy. Tracy Gary (2006:104), an active philanthropist, emphasizes its place of significance: “[...] the act of giving of our time and money for the public good, as the greatest place of leverage for women and girls for our time.” As a key leveraging threshold, it enables women to make use of both their financial power and their experience as a marginalized Other in a patriarchal culture. The term Other, as it is being used here, means more than just someone who is not me, for the word contains within it a prejudicial stigma, a sense of being socially unacceptable, marginalized, weakened by status, poor in material and health value, and of course, of being that someone defined by Thomas Belmonte as “the negation of the socially affirmed self” (as cited by William, 2006: 160). In the case of being part of the political elitist class, women financial and experience power can be the key to contribute (through volunteerism) a lot to the development of their society.

As volunteers, women have worked hard over the years to relieve suffering. They also come from a long line of experienced fund-raisers. Jane Addams and Susan B. Anthony, for example, excelled in not only framing the arguments for “women’s equality and empowerment,” but were also “masterful at raising the funds to nourish the movement.” Such a heritage finally paid off for in November 2007, the Women’s Funding Network (wfnet.org), a group of 146 women’s funds, partnered with visionary donors to launch Women Moving Millions, a three-year campaign to raise \$150 million in the US. This was an objective they not only met but exceeded on the grounds of bettering of women situation, even though they exceeded their believe by reaching out to and giving the needy an improved life and future. The needy here stand for the sick, the hungry, the depraved, and the marginalized and so on. By mid-May 2009, the campaign had reached one hundred seventy six million dollars, exceeding its initial goal by sixteen percent, which they used in reaching more than twice the needy as they initially thought (Damen and McCuiston, 2010: 130).

Whatever, with this financial power in hand, women can become even more effective philanthropists, addressing not only social problems but also the roots of such problems, difficulties often deeply embedded in issues of Otherness and difference. The fact that money and its accumulation has become the driving force in the world and in Cameroon as a whole, fueled it seems by a bottomless hunger, cannot be ignored, for such attitudes create imbalances which philanthropy ends up trying to resolve (Deardorff, 2004: 56). Trying to resolve these problems can be better done by women who have had the experiences of those they are reaching out to, and of course this brings to mind the Marginalizing dynamic narrative.

This narrative, thought often questioned, sustain that women can certainly relate to the search for a better treatment or empowerment of themselves and the other needy. Within such a paradigm, men tend to be privileged as well as so-called masculine aspects like spirit, transcendence, and light. Betty De Shong Meador (2000: 45) stresses the true seriousness of the situation for women. She points out that one of the greatest problems for women in most parts

¹ OAU, www.achpr.org/files/instruments/achpr/banjul_charter.pdf OR hlibrary.umn.edu/instree/z1afchar.htm, OAU Doc. CAB/LEG/67/3 rev. 5, 21 I.L.M. 58 (1982), 03 March 2017

of the world today is that they know no other way. They have in a sense been colonized by a patriarchal culture with no other heritage to remember, no other paradigm to imagine. Thinking she has no inherent value, she may seek worth externally, striving to gain approval from others, serving their needs at the expense of her own, holding herself to unattainable standards of perfection, while more and more of her true identity disappears into the shadows.

A male paradigm still defined women even with the advent of postmodernism. It still shaped their behavior, whether they were competing with men or craving their attention, for they existed in an environment that did not support them for who they were. Being female was still associated with inferiority, impregnated with an all too familiar struggle to endure (Thomas, 1990: 49). But this inferior paradigm has been clearly shifted by the opinion of the CERAC, as they do not only use their husbands position to define themselves. These women use the opportunities that come along with their position and financial power to reach out to the needy, elevate the position of the other women, mostly rural in nature, to meet up with the expectations of the changing times. In fact, the attitude assumed and the philosophy of the founding President and the women that constitute the "Circle of Friends of Cameroon" CERAC, its French acronym, created in 1995 has been to be of help to the needy and the empowerment of their own.

The Circle of Friends of Cameroon was created by the First Lady of Cameroon, Chantal Biya. It is a humanitarian, apolitical and nonprofit making association that seeks to cater for the needs of the vulnerable groups in Cameroon. Its membership is composed of women of both national and international origins and therefore enjoys the plurality of cultures of its members. The major objective of CERAC was to fight against all forms of suffering among the vulnerable groups of the Cameroonian society. The missions of CERAC were meant to deal with problems in the socio-economic environment within which the association has continued to evolve. Hence, This study is an attempt to situate the activities and successes recorded by CERAC since 1995 within some prominent theoretical claims of feminism. Thus, understanding the activities and successes of the CERAC is a justifiable feminist claim finder.

Situational Context:-

Women folk and International status change:-

In order to ease the understanding of CERAC's scope of operations in Cameroon, it is important to briefly present the status of the Cameroonian woman. Historically, African traditional societies culturally conspired to deprive women of socio-economic independence and creativity. Women constituted 52 per cent of the population of Cameroon and played a very important role in the development of society at all levels. Unfortunately, they functioned from a subordinate position in both traditional and state institutions. Women's empowerment was an issue of national interest even though government efforts towards the encouragement of women's emancipation were still not enough. Women still wallowed in poverty, illiteracy and unemployment. The status of women was not well defined, promoted or protected. Male domination was still alive and strong and forced women to accept the roles of housekeeping, childbearing, sexual enslavement, just to name these few. Throughout history women were seen as weak and vulnerable which is the reason why they figure as one of the vulnerable groups recognized by the UNO. (Ban Ki Moon, 2012). Later, at independence and post independence periods in Cameroon, even rich and wealthy women performed three major functions of wife, mother and entertainer. The secondary Survey on Employment and Informal sector revealed that women have been most affected by unemployment. The rate of employment in 2010, for instance, was 71.1% for men and 61.4% for women. The unemployment rate was 4.5% for women and 3.1% for men. 92% of women carried out their activities in the informal sector while only 08% worked in the public and private formal sector. Consequently women picked up mediocrity, lack of accomplishment, and laziness. Ministry of Women's Empowerment and the Family, 2017: 3).

Poverty was not only a social problem but it was highly feminized. Poverty among women is a circumstantial situation and poverty levels among women have remained highest in African societies. (Yang, 2016: 113). Hence, the economic situation of women was the main reason for their subjugation especially in the post colonial period in Cameroon. Rural women were mostly affected by poverty. While men travelled to industrial areas to look for jobs women stayed back to run the rural economy as subsistent famers. Women were mostly active in the informal sector which was not well structured; provided mean jobs and meager wages; and left the women in precarious conditions. This limited women's access to economic assets such as land and loans (Ministry of Women's Empowerment, 2017: 4). Rural women lived without electricity, telephones, potable water. More than 53 percent of African women are illiterates while two-thirds of the 40 million African kids who do not attend school are girls. (Yang, 2016:114). This is the context in which CERAC was created.

The realization of this study is the result of a historical research that began in 2014 as part of the preparations of the fifteenth anniversary celebration of CERAC. Both secondary and primary sources were exploited for data collection. Most of the material used for writing this paper was collected from primary sources such as speeches, letters, reports, minutes of meetings, and interviews. Secondary sources included books, magazines, articles and news papers with relevant information to the framework of this subject. This work is presented in three parts with an introduction and a conclusion. The first part presents CERAC and its objectives. The second part treats its social activities towards the different vulnerable and less privileged groups of the Cameroonian society. The third part concentrates on the activities of CERAC that were particularly geared towards the empowerment of the woman and the girl child.

The activities of CERAC harmoniously integrated the policies of the Ministry of Women's Affairs that was created in 1984 to cater for women's issues. In 2004 this ministry's missions were redefined and it was renamed the Ministry of the Promotion of the Woman and the family. CERAC as an association has diversified its services towards the destitute, the under-privileged, the physically disabled, and the poor all over the national territory. Its influence has impacted the lives of women including those who live in the rural areas of Cameroon. (Ayang'ma: 2016: 66-72). In 2007 following its actions of solidarity and proximity with the less privileged, CERAC gained international recognition and was recognized as a public utility by the Presidential decree of 23 April 2007.² It is therefore absolutely necessary to write the history of CERAC and its contribution to development in Cameroon since its creation.

The paper contends that CERAC has played and continues to play a great role in the resolution of socio-economic problems in Cameroon. It demonstrates with a feminist backing how women's solidarity can create potentials and successfully achieve important goals in the development of their society. It focuses on the humanitarian activities of CERAC and how they have evolved from 1995 to 2016, adapting to social and economic changes in Cameroon. Following a historical and analytical approach, this work will trace the methods of operation and the modifications applied following the specific needs of the different groups of beneficiaries. It will expose CERAC as a working tool for the empowerment of the Cameroonian woman and the promotion of basic human rights for the vulnerable in the society. This will cut through areas like formal education, vocational training, health, farming and other self sustaining activities.

The Cerac:-

A Brief Outlook:-

CERAC, with headquarter in Yaounde, was created in 1995 according to Law No. 90/053 of 19 December 1990 by Mrs. Chantal Biya, First Lady of Cameroon.³ As the Founding President of CERAC, Mrs. Chantal Biya has headed this association since its creation. The members of this humanitarian organization put together their talents and financial capacities to achieve the goals of the association. The major objective of this association is to fight against all forms of suffering among the vulnerable groups of the Cameroonian Society especially women and girls.

The objectives of CERAC emanated from its social and economic context and are as follows: provide humanitarian assistance to the needy; contribute to the promotion of the woman and the education of the girl child and the wellbeing of childhood; sensitize national and international opinion on the plight of vulnerable groups; maintain conviviality and solidarity between its members; cultivate and reinforce through its member the ties of friendship between Cameroon and the International community; promote the image of Cameroon across her national borders (CERAC 2010: 38-39).

CERAC's resources are obtained statutorily and through the financial obligations of its members. Money is raised through the payment of registration and membership fees of each member following her admission into the association. Annual subscriptions and dues are also paid in by members who occasionally contribute money for specific activities and projects. CERAC sometimes benefits from Material, financial and human resources from other charity organizations. More concretely, CERAC draws its material, financial and human resources from its founding president, its members, its partners, people of goodwill and from fundraisings. The members provide expertise needed for the diverse activities of CERAC. (CERAC: 2014: 4).

² Decree No --- of 23 April 2007 recognizing CERAC as an NGO of Public Utility.

³ Textes de création du Cercle des Amis du Cameroun.

Membership in CERAC is opened to all physical and moral persons who adhere to its statutes. There are two wings of membership – the national and the diplomatic wing. The members of CERAC are recruited among women of diverse origins which makes CERAC a multinational organization. They include female ministers and members of Government, wives of members of government, female chiefs of diplomatic missions, wives of chiefs of diplomatic missions, female representatives of International organizations, wives of representatives of international organizations and all other persons accepted by the founding president with the capacity to contribute to the realizations of the objectives of CERAC. CERAC therefore enjoys the rich diversity of the origins of its members and the plurality of their cultures. Both the foreigners and the Cameroonians work in solidarity to support the actions of CERAC. (CERAC 2010: 5).

The missions of CERAC involved different domains like health, education, assistance to the less privileged and victims of disasters and catastrophes. CERAC is also interested in assisting the vulnerable (orphans, lepers, the physically disabled, old people) especially rural women and girls. The missions of CERAC were meant to deal with problems in the socio-economic environment within which the association has continued to evolve. Its socio-economic environment was characterized by natural disasters and catastrophes, pockets of poverty and misery, the presence of the physically disabled, HIV AIDS patients and the distress of the vulnerable. (CERAC: 2010: 5) Economically, CERAC has had an essential mission to accompany rural women and the destitute through several support programs.

The ambitions of CERAC have never changed since 1995. CERAC has facilitated the access of all to basic social services of quality, notably health, education and training – three key indicators of human development. However, the last eight years experienced the modernization of the management and execution of CERAC activities. CERAC has worked alongside the government in relation to all its development policies especially the “Vision 2035”.⁴ CERAC became resolutely involved in the dynamics of achieving sustainable development to which Cameroon is subjected.

Cerac and Social Up Drive Consonants:-

This section of the paper will discuss the actions of CERAC underlining its deep rooted involvement in public policies. It will scrutinize the means of reinforcement of this humanitarian dynamism spurred by its founding president. It will demonstrate that the actions of CERAC tally appropriately with the fundamental rights defined in article 25 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights which states as follows:

Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.⁵

The key to Africa’s development is harnessing the energy and creativity of Africans. Empowering African women is essential to enabling African societies to achieve their goals (Fraser-Moleketi, 2012). In face of the plight of the underprivileged in Cameroon, CERAC resolved to undertake projects meant to accompany the disadvantaged population. All across the national territory, the ambition of CERAC has been to touch all the targeted groups, including those in the rural areas. As a result, CERAC got involved in the organization of manifestations to commemorate national and world days. These include the World leprosy Day, International Day for the Handicapped, World AIDs Day, National AIDS Free Holidays, International Day for the Fight against Sickle cell diseases, Day of the African Child, National Youth Day, International Women’s Day, Rural Women’s Day, International Day for the Elderly among others (CERAC, 2014: 6-7). In addition to the campaigns carried out during such events, CERAC has always assisted the concerned with gifts to improve on their physical wellbeing. Considerable efforts have been made to increase the number of beneficiaries of CERAC’s generosity. CERAC has assisted, comforted and supported people in distress resulting from poverty, misery, disasters, illnesses, old age and pandemics.

⁴ This is the platform for Cameroon’s development titled “Cameroon: An Emerging democratic and United Country in Diversity”. It is Cameroon’s bold vision for long term development for the next 20- 30 years aimed at making Cameroon an emerging country by 2035. See Ministry of the Economy, Planning and Regional Development, Cameroon Vision 2035 Working Paper, February 2009, pp. 6-7.

⁵ United Nations, www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/, 03 March 2017.

CERAC has always come to the help of victims of disasters. The most illustrative example of this was that of orphan victims of the Nsam catastrophe of 1998. Apart from the physical wounds and mutilations, the trauma that stroke about forty of the most affected children raised clouds of uncertainty about their future. CERAC which at the time had existed for just three years got engaged in ensuring the continuity of the education of these orphans. For seventeen years, CERAC has provided their basic needs which correspond highly to the fundamental human rights of children. These include the payment of school fees, purchase of school stationery, provision of pocket allowance, affectionate and psychological follow up and health care. The needs of the children grew alongside their ages. Some of these kids went through their education into the university level while the most brilliant ones continued to the doctorate level (CERAC, 2012: 22-23). Others benefitted from vocational trainings in areas like automobile mechanics, carpentry, computer science, and dressmaking. Today about ten of these orphans have got decent jobs and have started their families.

CERAC has assisted victims of natural disasters in several localities of Cameroon. They include victims of the flood in Limbe in 2003; landslide victims in Magha in 2007; windstorm victims in Balanga in 2009. The floods that occurred in the North, Far North, North West and East Regions of Cameroon in 2012 were also a major concern for CERAC. For these and victims of other natural disasters CERAC foresaw the following gifts: beds, mattresses, bed sheets, foodstuff (rice, salt, oil, sardine, sugar), bush lamps, cartons of soap, dresses and shoes, matches and kitchen utensils (CERAC, 2012: 4). CERAC has visited and handed gifts to the populations of 15 localities that were affected by disasters in all the ten regions of Cameroon. The association constructed 03 classrooms destroyed by windstorm in Ngaoundere and also constructed 05 wells and 05 latrines in Ngoyla in the East region following the 1998 diarrhea epidemic. The spontaneous reaction of CERAC to such situations was always backed by very comforting speeches full of love, compassion and hope for the victims (CERAC, 2010: 16-17).

The care for orphans and destitute populations continued with construction and rehabilitation of orphanages and centres for the disabled and destitute. It is important to note here that the diplomatic wing of CERAC has spearheaded the area of orphanage projects. The diplomats have amongst other social projects, constructed and rehabilitated several orphanages and homes for abandoned children. The brilliant actions of the diplomatic wing contributed in strengthening relations between Cameroon and its friends of the international community. CERAC realized the first project on the construction and equipment of the Fada orphanage in Rey Bouba in the North Region in 2009. It was composed of two dormitories, a refectory, an administrative bloc (with an infirmary and a modern kitchen), a modern toilet and an external kitchen, a latrine and a fence for security (CERAC, 2009). Between 1999 and 2015, CERAC constructed and equipped 04 orphanages in the West, North and far North regions. It rehabilitated and equipped 01 orphanage and offered gifts to 15 orphanages. 03 handicap centres have been rehabilitated and 05 have received donations from CERAC. The total number of projects carried out for destitute children and adults was 11 including the construction of wells for suffering communities in the East and Far North regions (CERAC, 2010: 13-15; CERAC, 2015: 4). These examples sufficiently show that CERAC and its founding president are playing their role in supporting the efforts of the public service in favour of the preservation and restoration of human dignity.

For twenty years, CERAC has been improving upon health services for individuals and communities. Health centers and hospitals have been benefitting from the goodwill of CERAC throughout the national territory. CERAC members benefit from sensitization on health issues. During their statutory meetings medical specialists come to speak to the women on health problems like cardiovascular diseases, stress, hepatitis, and pandemics. This notwithstanding, CERAC does more in the construction or rehabilitation and equipment of health units not leaving out donations of medical material and consumables. The construction, rehabilitation and renovation of health units almost have always included the construction of water wells, tanks and electrification. The gifts for hospitals and health centres usually include hospital beds, baby cots, delivery beds, surgical beds, surgical kits, surgical masks and coats, generators (for power back up), incubators, computers, motorbikes, pharmaceuticals and cleaning products. By the year 2015, CERAC had constructed and equipped 02 health centres, rehabilitated and equipped 13 health units, and donated medical gifts to 47 health units (CERAC, 2010: 26-29).

African feminism should not stereotype African women as problems to be solved but should portray them as people who are capable of setting their own priorities and agenda (Pearsall, 1986: 142). In this direction, CERAC has supported programs of prevention, information, education, communication, and the training of community relay volunteers, notably youths and women, in the fight against epidemics and pandemics. CERAC has always worked in partnership with health personnel, social workers, other actors of the civil society and administrators in the fight

against leprosy, sickle-cell disease, autism, and HIV/AIDS. Patients affected by these diseases generally become victims of stigmatization and social exclusion. CERAC has been at the service of such patients to reverse the myths surrounding these diseases.⁶

The engagement of CERAC in the fight against HIV/AIDS from 1995 resulted in the construction of six centers for prevention and voluntary screening across the country. These centers are found in six regions – the Centre, Littoral, Far North, South, South West and West regions of Cameroon. Between 1995 and 2014 CERAC has accompanied all the other actors in their campaigns against HIV especially the National Commission for the Fight Against AIDS (known by its French acronym CNLS) (National Aids Control Committee, 2007: 8). CERAC organizes educative talks to students and pupils annually on the prevention of this disease whose prevalence rate has dropped from 12% in 1995 to 5.1% in 2007, 4.3 in 2011 (Fondation Chantal Biya: 2015: 5).

Since 1999 CERAC has manifested her solidarity towards leprosy patients cutting across the ten regions of Cameroon. Every year, during the World Leprosy day commemoration, CERAC chooses a leprosy centre to which gifts are offered to the patients following their specific demands. CERAC has in the past renovated, rehabilitated and completed buildings of some leprosy centres while providing them electricity and potable water. CERAC has donated gifts to 16 leprosy centres and repeated their visits to five – Jamot, Mbingo, Mayemen, Nkolguet and Nden centres. CERAC has always aimed at reinforcing the capacities of leprosy patients in several fields such as poultry farming and food crop cultivation so as to make them productive and economically independent. Throughout its existence CERAC has worked towards the restoration of such patients into their right to human dignity (CERAC, 2001). CERAC readily accompanies the service in their mission of promoting good health in order count on a population capable of sustaining the challenges of the Cameroon's 'Vision 2035'.

Quality education has been one of the challenges faced by CERAC. One key element of feminism is to develop a theoretical tradition for women which can produce forms of knowledge that are centred on lives and celebrations of women across the various social, political and cultural divides (Pearsall, 1986: 24). In this light, the Founding President of CERAC who is also a UNESCO Goodwill Ambassador had engaged CERAC from its very beginning to follow the governmental policy as far as education is concerned. Since 2003 primary schools have been constructed and dilapidated ones have been renovated in several localities of the ten regions of Cameroon for quality education. The first two schools constructed by CERAC were in Bibe and Darang in the Adamawa region. Today, every region of Cameroon has seen at least one school constructed or renovated by CERAC. Classrooms and offices are constructed and equipped with benches, office material and furniture. Playgrounds, toilets and water points have been redesigned to clean up the learning environment of the children. Gifts of didactic material and school stationery are offered to educational institutions and students. CERAC has constructed rehabilitated and equipped schools 15 schools in nine regions of Cameroon and has donated School stationery to at least thirty-one primary schools. CERAC has also catered for the blind and the deaf by building training and reeducation centres to improve on their conditions. CERAC therefore contributes invaluablely to the enjoyment and pleasure of children, both in urban and rural areas, in their fundamental right to education.⁷

Educative talks have been organized annually and carried out by CERAC in secondary schools. This activity began in 2004 with talks on HIV/AIDS and its prevention organized for youths, between 15 and 24 years old, who were earmarked as the most vulnerable group as far as the illness was concerned. (Ministry of Public Health, 2008: 16-17). The prevalence of HIV AIDS among young girls was rated at 44.2% in 2004. Every first week of the month of February, which marks the launching of the Cameroon youth week activities, CERAC visits a selection of secondary schools where students are lectured on pertinent issues affecting the youths. The topics of discussion usually varied from health to civic education and the sessions are highly interactive giving the students the opportunity to express themselves freely. Peer educators were trained used for anti-AIDS campaigns organized all over the country. Students were advised to abstain from pre-marital sex and taught preventive measures against the contamination of the disease. Particular attention was also paid on societal ills meted out on the girl child like rape, premarital sex, pregnancy and early marriages (National AIDS Control Committee, 2007: 8-16).

⁶ Speech by John Nyah Teng, Spokesman for Lepers during CERAC's visits and Handing over of Gifts in Mbingo, Boyo Division, 28 January 2007.

⁷ Speech by Linda Yang, Personal Representative of the Founding President of CERAC, Mrs. Chantal Biya, Badeng, 10 November 2015.

Cerac and the Empowerment of Women and Girls:-

African women have increasingly been portrayed as strong and innovative agents in their specific contexts. It is therefore important to empower African women and work for them. To buttress the validity of this view, Mrs. Chantal Biya through her creation of CERAC was determined to take the Cameroonian woman out of economic frailty and vulnerability. In relation to this she says: "I personally chose to take care of children and women because they are the most vulnerable groups, but upon whom the society greatly depends." [Translation mine].⁸ CERAC is a practical example of women stepping out of the social norms of female vulnerability to empower themselves and their fellow women. Women could only achieve social liberation through their economic independence. Women needed to carry out economic activities to be able to support themselves and attain their physical and psychological freedom. CERAC was also created to recognize and address women's problems without stopping them from co-existing with men. Women were supposed to be helped to tactfully rebel against cultural tides to satisfy their families and societies without losing their souls. CERAC was not out to abolish the misery of women but to enable women to face societal challenges against their very nature and their emancipation. It was out to tackle the scourge of poverty encountered by women by helping them develop new skills in the creation and management of economic activities (Ayang'ma, 2016: 65).

Women empowerment can also be seen as the translation of feminist theory into a praxis that transforms activism, advocacy and policy-making as well as change the way in which women live their lives (McFadden: 2012). From 1999 CERAC decided to support rural women in all the ten provinces (now regions) of Cameroon. The actions of CERAC in this domain are also aimed at eradicating poverty especially amongst women. The amelioration of the condition of women and the promotion of the female genre were at the centre of public policies at both national and international levels. The actions of CERAC in this domain translate awareness and a real willingness to help women prepare themselves to fully play their role. These roles were individual, family, professional, economic, political and social responsibilities. CERAC understood from the beginning that it was better to teach women to fish than to give them fish, for a well trained woman was a precious tool for her family and the nation (CERAC 2009).

The principal actions of CERAC in this light revolved around the education of the girl child, the attachment of women to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), and vocational trainings. In addition to these, CERAC promoted educative talks on various domains such as health, the law, citizenship, and recently on cyber criminality and the risks linked to the high frequency of social media. The introduction of women to modern technologies was considered as an imperative measure for development. For it is difficult to move forward if half of the population is left out. In this light, CERAC has benefitted from the largess of several partners like the African Institute of Computer Sciences (popularly known by its French acronym IAI) and the Agency of Modern Technologies of Information and Communication also known by its French acronym ANTIC (Fondation Chantal Biya: 2015:41). The founding president of CERAC patronized the Operations "100.000 women, Horizon 2012" and "MIJEF 2035."⁹ As a result of these informative and instructive activities, the promotion and emancipation of women is a reality not only among CERAC members but to the targeted groups in the towns and villages of Cameroon. The actions of CERAC towards youths and women definitely contributed to the objective of equal opportunities between women and men for social progress. Physically disabled women and girls have received assistance from CERAC both materially and financially. In 2005 for instance, CERAC rehabilitated the Bobine d'Or Training Centre for disabled girls and women.¹⁰ Those who receive training are offered money and equipment for rents and running of their workshops. CERAC's support to these vulnerable groups enables them to integrate better and become more productive in the society.

CERAC pays great attention to the economic wellbeing of the rural women of Cameroon. CERAC is conscious of the reality that Women are more economically active in Africa as farmers, workers and entrepreneurs than anywhere

⁸ « J'ai personnellement choisi de m'occuper de l'enfance mais aussi de la femme parce que ce sont les couches les plus vulnérables, mais sur lesquelles la société compte énormément. » See Aurelien-Magloire Ayang'ma, Chantal Biya Un Appel du Destin, Yaoundé, Editions Ifrikiya, 2016, p. 65.

⁹ These are programmes that were both put in place by the African Institute of Computer Sciences (IAI) for the training of youths children and women in Information and Communication Technologies. The aim has been to develop the competence of the targeted groups by contributing to their self sufficiency through professional insertion. This is supposed to ensure the development of Cameroon by 2035. See (FCB: 2015: 41).

¹⁰ Minutes of the Ceremony of the handing over of Gifts and Rehabilitation of the Bobine d'Or Centre, Yaounde, April 2005.

else in the world (Fraser-Moleketi: 2012). CERAC has donated and continues to donate farm inputs to women's forums, associations and Common Initiative Groups to bolster agricultural activities. This activity was carried out by CERAC with the objective of alleviating poverty among the rural masses. The womenfolk were therefore targeted because rural women produced more than 80% of food consumed in urban areas needed to increase their yields (CERAC, 2017: 2-3). The inputs included cutlasses, hoes, files, spades, diggers, wheel barrows, rain boots, watering cans, sprayers, fertilizers, manure, improved seeds among others.

CERAC has evolved with modern times and from 2010 added to their list of gifts, items like water pumps, motorbikes, and tractors to ease movement and the cultivation of crops respectively. Atomizers and food preservation products, grinding mills for cereal and tuber crops and oil pressing mills have also been introduced as gifts to facilitate food preservation and sustainability. This gesture encouraged mass production and helped to fight against food insecurity which has had positive output and outcome. The sizes of cultivated acres have increased thanks to the improvement and change in the quality and quantity of inputs donated to women's groups. The level of production has increased and more food could be transported from farms to market with the help of wheelbarrows (CERAC Bangem Report, 2009).

Women have been introduced into livestock activities by CERAC. Livestock and animal husbandry in Cameroon traditional societies were always seen as male activities. Women could only assist their husbands in keeping birds and animals. From the late 1990s, CERAC encouraged women to rear animals by providing female Common Initiative Groups with livestock inputs. Women groups were offered sheep, chicks, piglets and inputs for poultries and piggeries. Canoes and fishing nets were specially offered to women in the Adamawa region of Cameroon who were particularly interested in fishing (CERAC Mayo Banyo Report, 2010). These became income generating activities for the women improving on their economic status.

For the past years CERAC has been a development partner to the peasant. CERAC, like many other Non Governmental Organizations came in with the top to bottom method. Efforts were deployed by CERAC to get to the women at the grassroots and involve them in fighting against poverty which was a household curse in Cameroon. Until 2008, CERAC assisted rural women with material gifts which improved on their performance. From 2008, CERAC decided to associate the rural women's element to all its projects. This meant that gifts and activities were foreseen for rural women even when the project was on health or education. During the General Assembly of 2009, a new option was introduced. It was about going an extra mile to create a relation of partnership with rural women. CERAC insisted on carrying out income generating activities with women associations and other Common Initiative Groups of rural women. This was to permit CERAC women to accompany the rural women from the beginning to the end of their projects and introduce certain values of sustainability and autonomy (CERAC, 2008). CERAC worked with CAREF (French acronym for the Project of Reinforcement of the Capacities of Women's Networks for the Fight against Poverty in Cameroon) for the development of millions of Cameroonian women. Their support has been on the promotion of human rights, management, thrifts and loans, health and community development. CERAC in partnership with CAREF organized training seminars for women on agricultural techniques, conservation of yields and the preparation of compost (CERAC Dschang Report, 2007).

Women from prehistoric times played key role in the welfare of their families and the life prospects of their children. They have been an important voice in the governance of their community and nation. Yet they faced an array of barriers that prevented them from playing these roles to their greatest capacities. Bridging the gender gap could yield profound and long-lasting economic returns (Pearsall, 1986: 145). In the light of this, CERAC's founding president and her members have never been indifferent to the plight of young girls. Apart from fighting for their education, CERAC has ensured that young girls and women receive proper training in the Women Empowerment Centres run by the government in different localities. Gifts were therefore foreseen for such centres during CERAC ceremonies for rural women. Women Empowerment centres were visited and offered gifts like gas cookers, refrigerators, sewing machines and computer sets; all these to facilitate the training of women and girls in self sustain trades. CERAC has also been involved in the construction and equipment of women empowerment centres where they find that the population needs one. Centres in Dizangue, Kumbo, Kumba, Mbengwi, Kaele, and Belo have benefitted from the magnanimity of CERAC in this area. Multifunction sewing machines were offered to groups of young girls who trained as seamstresses ran common workshops.

Conclusion:-

It is evident from this work that since 1995 CERAC has recorded invaluable successes, particularly in the domains of education, health, and economy. Its contribution in the dynamics of women empowerment through education and economic assistance is glaring. For the past twenty years CERAC has imposed itself, especially through its benevolent activities, as an actor of development that participates in the putting in place of public policies. CERAC has played a monumental and historic role in the socio-economic development of Cameroon in general and in the empowerment of the woman and the girl child in particular. Its influence has impacted the lives of women including those who live in the rural areas of Cameroon. It has also taken part in the promotion of basic human rights in numerous domains which include the promotion of women and equal opportunities, education, health, and assistance to vulnerable persons.

CERAC activities were not carried out without difficulties. Insecurity, distance and the remoteness of most areas of its activities constituted a slowdown in the execution and realization of projects. For example, it took a full day's journeys to travel from Yaounde where CERAC is based to places like Yokadouma in the East Region and Menji in the South West Region. It was very trying to finally realize projects in places like Kaele, Gashiga, and Bogo. Due to inaccessibility and financial constraints, some projects spilled over into the following year, causing an overload in the annual plan of action.

However, all these hurdles never stopped the stout-hearted CERAC ladies from achieving their goals. A positive change can be increasingly noticed among the members of CERAC. Because of their strong and genuine desire to address women's problems in and out of CERAC, the members have developed real friendship and solidarity among themselves. This is manifested by the absence of jealousy, enmity and rivalry. The women are warm open and very friendly with each other which is the spirit they encourage other female groups in Cameroon to develop. CERAC's actions demonstrate the fact that the association has worked indefatigably and that much has been done in twenty years of its existence. However, it appears that the more he successes recorded by CERAC, the greater the challenges. The rising rate of unemployment in Africa increase in poverty and constant threats to security and social peace have brought the organization face- to – face with enormous challenges and its efforts must be doubled.

As a recommendation, therefore, the diversification and intensification of partnership and the search for greater efficiency must be embarked on. CERAC has always invested on a synergy for actions with its partners and such partnerships should be reinforced. CERAC has to ameliorate its mode of operation in all its actions taking into consideration public policies and the progress in science and technology. There should be a constant improvement on its creativity and ability to adapt to the changing socio-political atmosphere.

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