

Kinship and Community Responses in the wake of the COVID-19 Pandemic

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ABSTRACT

Commonly referred to as ‘the most important health challenge of our times’, the Corona Virus has had devastating consequences and brought untold sufferings to communities and families around the world. A true example of a global problem, the effects of the corona virus has penetrated every community; big and small, rich or poor, necessitating wide ranging measures and interventions aimed at curbing the spread of the disease. While the World health organization (WHO) has coordinated unified efforts at the global stage, countries have put in place national strategies to deal with the rapid spread of the COVID-19. Prevailing socio-political conditions in Cameroon; the ongoing Anglophone crisis and the instability in the Northwest and Southwest regions of the country greatly dampened the rather timid response of the government of Cameroon to the outbreak of the pandemic. Businesses, non-governmental organizations, villages and individuals have been called into action to provide assistance to complement government efforts in the fight against the pandemic. One such responses has come from Nkwen ‘sons and daughters’ residing both in Cameroon and abroad. The paper assesses the conception, framing, and effectiveness of this community intervention and highlights the role of remittances and strong kinship ties in the fight against covid-19 in the Nkwen village of Bamenda, and Cameroon in general.

Key words Community, kinship, sustainable development, remittances, pandemic

INTRODUCTION

The number of recorded deaths from covid-19 and the seismic effect the disease has had on the world economy no doubt propelled the pandemic to the top priority item in the agenda of local, national, and international institutions. While the exact nature and evolution of the Corona virus was the subject of extensive disagreements in the academic, political, and policy-making environments in the early days, there was more harmonized messaging at all levels as the spread of the virus progressed, thanks in large part to the coordinated efforts of the WHO. The emphasis was on prevention and curbing the spread of the disease through barrier measures like frequent hand washing, social distancing, the use of face masks and hand sanitizers.

Conceptual Framework

History holds records of different pandemics that have affected the world with varying degree of consequences. Pandemics in the past have often been localized or affected particular regions of the world. The novelty of the Covid-19 pandemic is therefore not only the deadly nature of the disease, but the global nature of its spread. The spread of the disease reflects changes that have characterized the 21st century, notably the intensification of globalization.

Antras et al (2022) “document the importance of international trade for the diffusion of infections in several pandemics throughout history and by showing that trade and travel are closely intertwined.” Their work provides empirical evidence that shows both the linkages between international trade and the spread of pandemics, the speed of diffusion of the pandemic increases as international trade links intensify. The

intensification of trade linkages with the proliferation of both Regional and multilateral trade agreements in recent decades have greatly facilitated the spread of the covid-19 pandemic and other diseases. While the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) received only 124 notifications of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) between 1948-1994, the World Trade Organization that replaced the GATT received 227 agreements between 1995 to 2007 (Ravenhill, 2008). There has been an exponential growth in the number of regional agreements at the dawn of the new millennium to create the situation referred to as ‘Spaghetti bowls’ of RTAs (Baldwin, 2006). The rapid expansion in both regional and multilateral trade and the associated exchanges greatly facilitated the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus around the world.

The massive expansion of the tourism sectors both at the global and national level is another important contributor to the spread of the pandemic that resulted in a nose dive in economies around the world. Tourism is considered one of the major pillars in contributing to citizen welfare and poverty alleviation in host countries. The total contribution of trade and tourism to the global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was 23 percent lower in 2022 compared to 2019 prior to the COVID pandemic. The number of international tourist arrivals worldwide peaked in 2019 at about 1.4 billion people, declining to some 407 million in the first year of the health crisis, showing signs of recovery by 2023 (Statista, 2024). Like many other countries around the world, Cameroon has earmarked the development of its tourism potential as one of the pillars to help the country emerge and eradicate poverty by 2030. In the National Development Strategy 2030, the government ‘intends to (i) define and organize (public and private) investment priorities around two or three flagship tourism products; (ii) gradually phase out the management of accommodation facilities, and (iii) increase tourist opportunities particularly by facilitating investments in accommodation facilities and also by promoting cultural sites and events ...’ among other measures (NDS30, 2020). This emphasis on promoting tourism, along with international trade and the associated linkages left Cameroon, like many other countries around the world vulnerable to the spread of the COVID-19 virus. Despite coordinated efforts at the global stage to contain and manage the spread of the virus, national responses especially in Cameroon were greatly limited by inadequate finances and widespread poverty among the population.

Prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 virus, the economic growth of Cameroon averaged 4.3 percent for the decade up to 2019. The country ranked 153 out of 189 countries in the Human Development Index, over 55 percent of Cameroonians lived in poverty with about 37.7 of people severely impoverished. According to the World Food Program (2020), ‘the incidence of poverty is particularly high in rural parts of the northernmost and eastern regions, where structural underdevelopment and recurring climatic shocks, including floods and prolonged dry spells, limit people’s ability to thrive’. The ability of the government of Cameroon to respond to the financial and material demands to contain the Covid-19 pandemic was therefore limited. The citizens on their part faced difficulties adhering to containment measures like social distancing, especially those that depended on petty businesses for survival and livelihoods, the wearing of face masks and sanitizers as both items witnessed shortages in the market and soaring prices due to high demand. Local communities, Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), schools and churches all made significant contributions in sensitize the population, and provide material and financial support towards curbing the spread of covid-19 in Cameroon. The focus of this study is the efforts of local communities, notably the Nkwen community under the stewardship of the village development association, the Nkwen Cultural and Development Association (NCDA).

Government Response to the Outbreak of the Pandemic

In response to the outbreak of the pandemic, the Prime Minister and Head of Government of Cameroon issued a statement on the 17th of March, 2020 outlining the country’s strategy in dealing with the Covid-19 virus. Below are some of the measures put in place by the government:

- Closure of land, air, and sea borders, with all passengers’ flights suspended with the exception of cargo flights and vessels transporting consumer products and essential goods and materials,

- Issuance of visas to Cameroon at the various airports suspended,
- Closure of schools and training centers, both private and public,
- Gatherings of more than fifty (50) people prohibited throughout the national territory,
- School and university competitions postponed,
- Bars, restaurants, and entertainment spots were closed from 6 PM,
- The public was urged to strictly observe the hygiene measures recommended by the WHO, including regular hand washing with soap, avoiding close contact such as shaking of hands or hugging, and covering the mouth when sneezing.
- A toll-free number 1510 was also set up for the mobilization of rescue teams to assist the population in case of emergencies. The government also ensured regular announcement on the national radio and tv channels informing the population of the barrier measures.

As stated above, government strategy was put in place on March 17th, 2020, close to three months after the initial outbreak of the pandemic in the Wuhan Province of China. It is equally important to note that the response strategy was only put in place after 10 people had been diagnosed with the virus in Cameroon. It is hard to tell how many people had actually been in contact with the virus at this stage. In a country that was already struggling with high rates of poverty, the purchase of face masks, sanitizers and other necessities to contain the spread of the disease (it should be noted that sharp increases in demand and the unavailability of these items saw a huge increase in their retail prices) became a huge burden to the population. The situation was made even worse because of the drop in the incomes of most households that depend on petty trade and the production and sale of local products for livelihood. Communities, and other stakeholders intervened in various ways to provide assistance to the population.

Nkwen Community Responses to the Outbreak of the Covid-19 Pandemic

Under the stewardship of the Global Nkwen Cultural and Development Association (an association that unites the indigenes of the village both in and out of the country) and other associated groups, the sons and daughters of Nkwen village in the North West Region of Cameroon launched a number of initiatives that were meant to complement government measures to effectively curb the spread of the coronavirus within their community. Through generous donations from the indigenes, a number of measures were put in place, notably:

- The fabrication of over one hundred and twenty (120) hand wash stations that were strategically placed in front of schools, churches, junctions of main roads, community halls and other locations that attracted villagers,
- Owing to the shortage of face masks in the market, the production of over fifteen thousand (15,000) face masks that met health standards was commissioned, and donated to the villagers and residents. The project oversaw the acquisition and distribution of over one thousand five hundred (1500) liters
- of hand sanitizers to the population,
The project dispatched teams of health professionals and other volunteers to do door to door sensitization
- on the dangers of the covid-19 virus and the barrier measures put in place to curb the spread of the disease. Sensitization was done in local languages and pidgin English (form of broken English commonly spoken in this part of the country) to ensure the locals received and understood the message and built trust with the locals.
With the support of traditional authorities, the project also brought together quarter heads from all
- quarters of the village for sensitization on the dangers of the covid-19 virus, the importance of maintaining barrier measures, the use of materials donated to the quarters, and tasked them with ensuring the sustainability of the initiative.

Though sponsored from donations of Nkwen sons and daughters, the project brought together both indigenes, other residents (given the fact that the village was host to thousands of internally displaced people fleeing

conflict from other remote areas of the North West Region) and health professionals. Nkwen indigenes residing abroad, especially those in countries greatly affected by the corona virus spread like the United States, Great Britain, and Canada also played important roles in the design, sponsorship, and execution of the project given they had witnessed first-hand the devastating consequences of the pandemic.

METHODOLOGY

This paper examines community responses intended to compliment government measures to contain the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. Focus is placed on the efforts of ‘Nkwen Sons and Daughters’ or indigenes. Nkwen is a village in the heart of Mezam Division of the North West Region of Cameroon. The area has witnessed a sharp increase in the population due to an influx of internally displaced people fleeing conflict in the more remote areas of the North West region in the ongoing Anglophone Crisis. The poverty map set up by the government of Cameroon also showed an increase in poverty in the North West, Far North and South West Regions ranging from 57%, 77% and 21% in 2019 compared to 55%, 55% and 18% in 2014 (World Bank, 2019). To achieve the objective, a descriptive survey was conducted using google forms to gather information on the motives, nature, and effectiveness of measures put in place by indigenes of the Nkwen village to help contain the spread of the disease within the village. Since mobilization for community response was done via an online group, it was equally necessary to resort to online channels to collect data so as to ensure wider coverage considering the fact that many of the people that were part of the initiative were in other regions of the country and abroad. Forty respondents answered the questionnaires, and the data was analyzed using charts and other statistical tools. The results are presented below.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

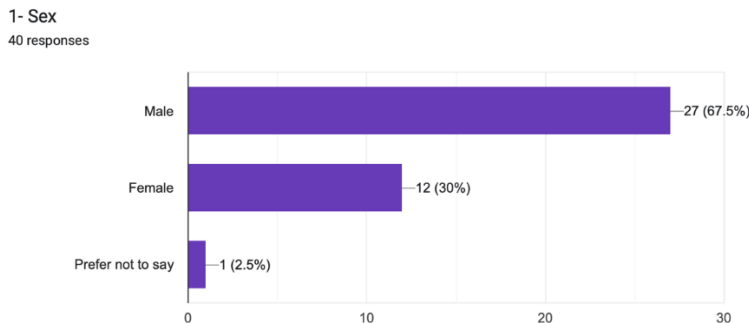


Fig 1. Sex of Respondents

Twenty-seven of the forty responses to the survey came from men (67.5 %) while twelve respondents were women (30%) and one respondent (2.5%) chose not to indicate their sex.

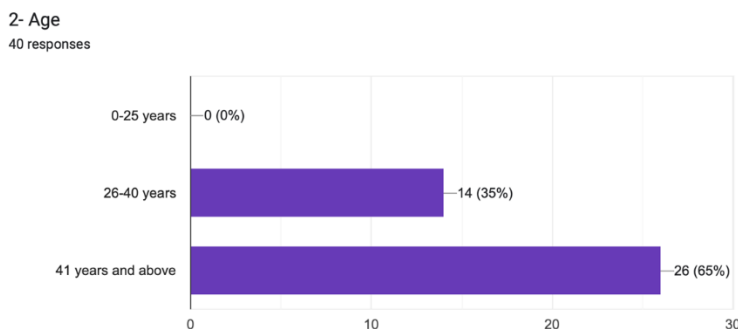


Fig. 2. Age Distribution of Respondents

The Data collected indicates that a greater proportion of the respondents (65%) were aged forty-one and above, while the rest of the respondents were between twenty-six and forty years (35%). Respondents forty-one years and above are likely to have more financial, intellectual, and material support to offer to such initiative, and understandably pay more attention to issues of health than those in younger age brackets.

3- Formal Education

40 responses

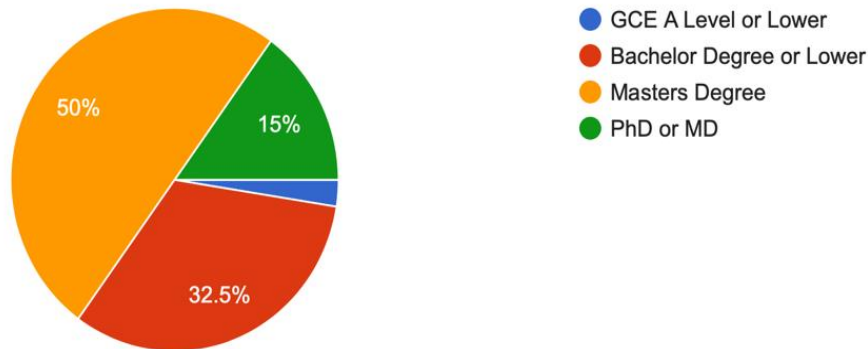


Fig.3. Formal Educational Level of Respondents

Majority of the respondents (50%) were holders of a Masters Degree, followed by holders of Bachelor Degree or lower (32.5%). The ability of those in these categories to appreciate the severity of the covid-19 pandemic in the early days and their financial capacities could be one of the reasons that account for higher involvement rates of those with higher levels of education.

4- Present Location

40 responses

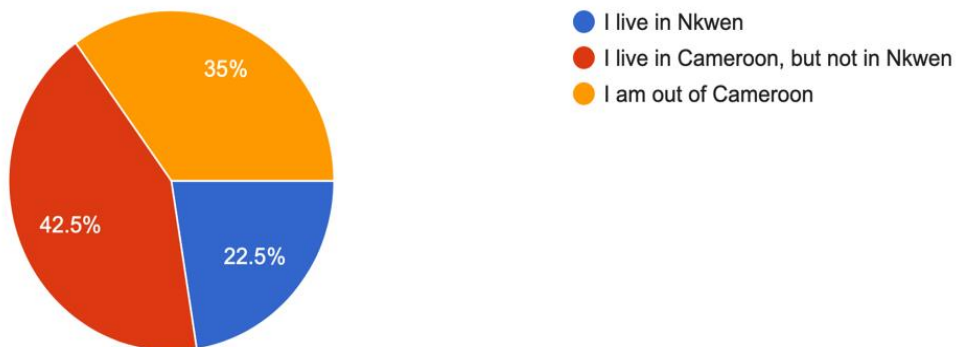


Fig. 4: Present Location of Respondents

The responses in fig. 4 above indicate strong kinship ties among indigenes of Nkwen. Despite being out of the village, over 77.5% of the indigenes saw it necessary to contribute in the fight against the spread of covid-19 in their community of origin. Interestingly, we discover the importance of remittances in community-based initiatives in the fight against the covid-19 virus. 35% of the respondents live out of Cameroon, while 42.5% live in regions out of Nkwen but within the national territory.

5- What was the main reason for your involvement in the Global NCDA COVID-19 initiative

40 responses

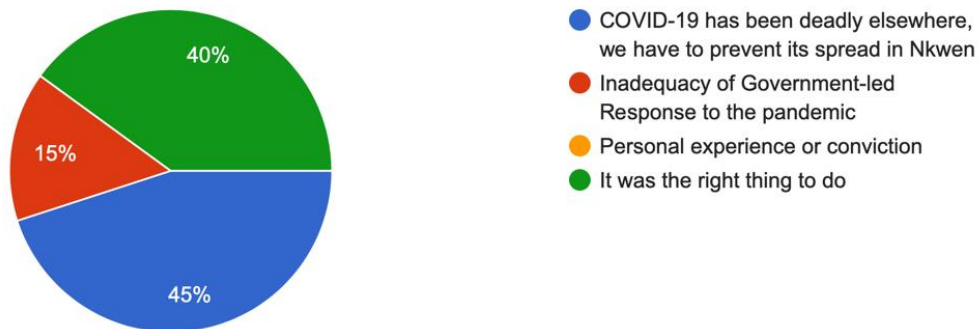


Fig. 5: Motivations for involvement in fight against covid-19 in Nkwen.

Reflecting the responses in Fig. 4 above (notably 77.5% of respondents being out of the community), majority of the respondents (45%) refer to the deadly nature of covid-19 elsewhere as strong motivation for their involvement in the fight to prevent the spread of the virus in Nkwen. 40% of the respondents felt it was the right thing to do, while 15% of the respondents felt government-led responses to the outbreak of the pandemic were inadequate and saw the need for complementary community-based initiatives to fight the spread of the pandemic.

6- What was the nature of your contribution to the initiative?

40 responses

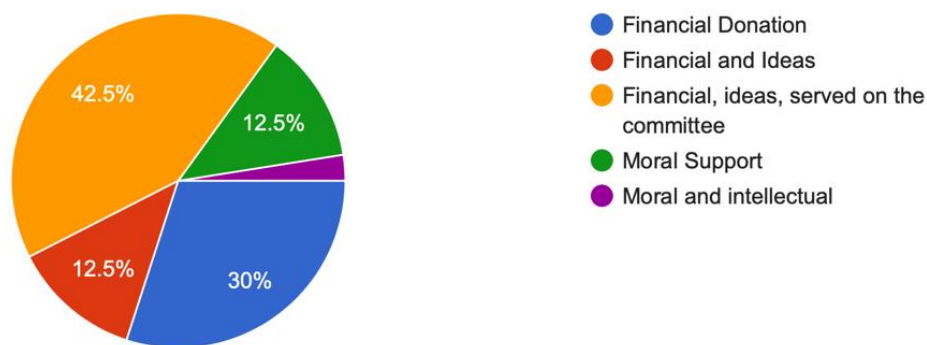


Fig. 6: Nature of Contribution.

Most of the respondents donated financially, contributed ideas and served on committees that worked to implement the project. Committees were set up on basis of competences, professional background, and willingness to participate. This approach negates the more common practices of nepotism that is prevalent in government and other community-based projects. Considering the severity of the covid-19 virus, care had to be taken to use available resources efficiently and maximize outcomes to set a new precedence for the community. Interestingly, involvement in the initiative was not only limited to finances and ideas, as 12.5% of respondents indicated that their involvement was limited to moral support. Indigenes that were unable or unwilling to support the initiative financially still constituted part of the project morally, limiting any exclusion on financial basis.

7- How satisfied were you with the framing, strategies, approach of the initiative?

40 responses

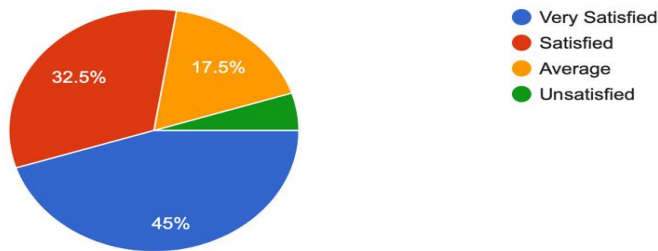


Fig. 7: Respondent Satisfaction with Framing, Strategies, and Approach of the Initiative.

Overall, a high percentage of the respondents were satisfied with the framing, strategies, and approach adopted to fight the spread of the covid-19 in the Nkwen community. This underscores the importance of community ownership of development projects from conception to execution.

8- How satisfied are you with the way the Committee executed the project?

40 responses

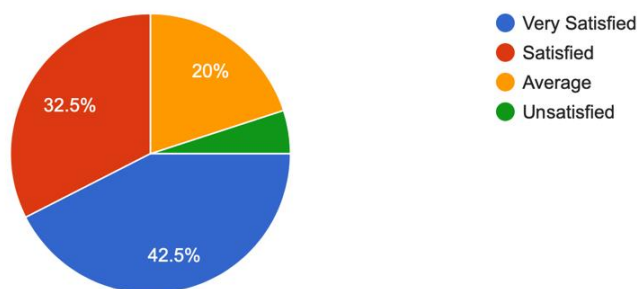


Fig. 8: Satisfaction with the Execution of the Project.

In line with the responses in question 7 above, majority of the respondents were satisfied with the manner of execution of the project. Only 5% of respondents were unsatisfied with the way the committee that was in charge of the execution of the project performed. This low percentage represents a win for the committee and sets a good precedence for future community-based initiatives.

9- In your opinion, did the initiative attain the objectives; was it a success?

40 responses

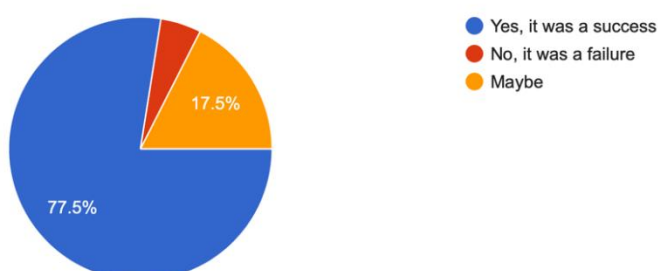


Fig. 9. Success Rate of the Project.

The Global Nkwen Cultural and Development Association (Global NCDA) led initiative to fight the spread of the covid-19 virus in the Nkwen community focused on the sensitization of the community on the deadly nature of the corona virus, the importance of adhering to prescribed barrier measures (social distancing, use of face masks and sanitizers). Information was disseminated in the local languages of indigenes, and residents from other villages. Facemasks and hand sanitizers were donated free of charge to the population, and hand was stations were set up in front of public places like churches, schools, community halls, police stations, major road junctions and intersections. While 17.5% of respondents were unsure of the success of the above measures to curb the spread of the covid-19 in the Nkwen community, 77.5% of respondents thought the initiative was a success. 5% of the respondents (same as the 5% in figure 7 above) thought the project was a failure indicating consistency in the findings.

10- Was the execution of the project transparent? Have the funds contributed been accounted for ?
40 responses

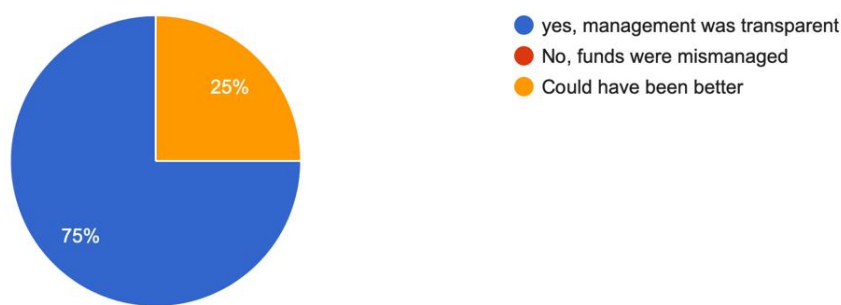


Fig.10: Transparency in the Execution of the Project.

Interestingly, the execution of the project avoided the usual ‘corrupt’ label commonly associated with most projects executed in Cameroon. The country has consistently ranked high in the Corruption Perception Index of Transparency International for the past decades (142nd among 180 countries in the index in 2022). 75% of respondents believed the execution of the project was transparent and 25% thought the execution could have been better. None of the respondents thought the funds for the project were mismanaged. This level of transparency could be explained by strong kinship ties, and the fact that community members involved (most of whom are well educated and above 41 years of age as seen in Fig. 2&3) are well respected with reputations to protect within the community.

11- Would you participate or recommend a friend or family member contribute to any such initiatives in the future?
40 responses

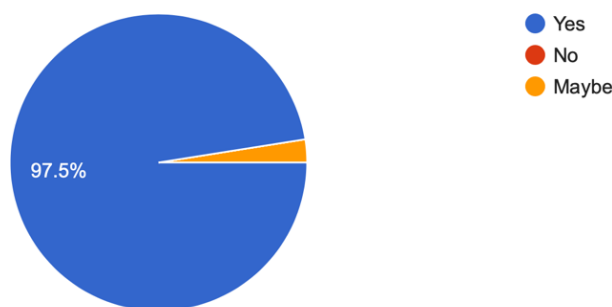


Fig.11: Involvement in Future Initiatives

An incredibly high percentage of the respondents (97.5%) indicated their willingness to participate or recommend the participation of their friends and family members in such initiatives in the future. This is consistent with the other results indicated below on the framing, execution, and transparency of the initiative.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper set out to examine community responses intended to compliment government measures to contain the spread of the covid-19 pandemic. Focus was placed on the efforts of 'Nkwen Sons and Daughters' or indigenes residents both at home and abroad. The literature reviewed indicates close linkages between globalization (international trade, tourism and associated travels) and the spread of the corona virus. Data was collected using an online questionnaire administered to those who took part in and benefited from the initiative. Findings indicate a positive relation between close kinship ties and motivation to participate in community-based initiative in the fight against the spread of covid-19 virus in the Nkwen community. The study also emphasized the willingness of those above 41 years of age and those with a Bachelor's Degree and above to take leadership in coordinating efforts at community development. The findings also reinforced the perception that unlike projects executed in the public sector, community-based initiatives were more transparent and had a higher success rate with regards to initial objectives. Community ownership of projects, and the empowering of communities to take active part in local development is therefore highly advised if Cameroon is to achieve the National Development Strategy 2030 amongst other things. Further research can also be carried out on similar community led initiatives to promote development in other areas around the country to better understand and find ways to promote community involvement in sustainable development projects.

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