Valorization of Investments in the Logone and Benue Valleys of Cameroon

In Cameroon, agriculture employs 70 percent of the workforce, providing 30 percent of the country’s export revenue and 42 percent of its gross domestic product. Despite the sector’s importance, however, it is largely confined to low-production subsistence farming, especially in the north and far north regions of the country.

Serious constraints limit the productivity of the agricultural sector in Cameroon. They include declining soil fertility, limited use of fertilizer, lack of farm mechanization, poor water management, low adoption of high-yielding crop varieties, and obsolete farming techniques.

Among all the limiting factors in the northern areas, water is the most critical. Only about 35,000 hectares are under irrigation in Cameroon, representing less than 2 percent of the country’s potentially irrigable land area of more than 2 million hectares. Cameroon, however, has no specific irrigation legislation, and the agriculture sector is not even mentioned in its 1998 Water Law.

Cameroon also lacks suitable legislation for the creation of water user associations (WUAs) with robust governance arrangements and compulsory participation of land holders. The relationship between government institutions and farmers, in terms of their respective rights and duties, is not clearly spelled out. Moreover, state-owned enterprises have been in charge of key phases of irrigation management as well as of agricultural production in Cameroon, a situation that has hindered both farmers’ participation and private sector involvement.
In FY2020, the World Bank was preparing two projects to address these concerns: (1) Valorization of Investments in the Valley of the Benue (P166072) and (2) Valorization of Investments in the Valley of the Logone (P168772). Each project (known as VIVAs) called for an investment of US$200 million (US$400 million in total). Both combine improvements in infrastructure with related institutional and governance reforms in the irrigation subsector, along with rehabilitation or extension of irrigated areas. As part of the preparation process, the VIVA projects were required to undertake an analysis of governance of the subsector, to ensure both a successful project implementation and a favorable, needed institutional transformation.

The project task team for both VIVA Logone and VIVA Benue has been working with the government to improve the institutional framework and develop regulations for improving irrigation governance in the northern regions. The analysis used a process described in the World Bank’s Governance in Irrigation and Drainage Resource Book. This process also resulted in a report highlighting the significant potential in the north (Benue Valley) and far north regions (Logone Valley) for improvement of irrigation development and management.

The resulting report includes a diagnostic exercise examining parastatal institutions that manage irrigation schemes, the current legal framework and responsibilities, and a roadmap with a concrete set of actions. The report represented a timely contribution to the preparation of the projects, both of which combine improvements in infrastructure with institutional and governance reforms in the irrigation subsector. Both projects aim to support a combination of large-scale irrigation projects and small-scale microprojects.

The work also allowed the team to consolidate with the Government of Cameroon the new irrigation strategy based on four main axes: (1) irrigation development and rehabilitation with a progressive transfer of the operation and maintenance of irrigation schemes to the irrigation WUAs, (2) transfer of the land preparation services to the private sector, (3) promotion of the private sector in the commercialization of agricultural value chains (for example, in rice production), and (4) review of the role of the government, particularly the parastatal agencies.

Moreover, a participatory process for decision-making spelled out in the Governance in Irrigation and Drainage Resource Book allowed the team to establish a clear roadmap for the next actions. Among the main outputs of the process were an action plan for the restructuring of parastatal institutions, strengthening of WUAs, development and strengthening of a legal framework to enable WUA formation, and private sector participation in agricultural production through irrigated schemes.

As a result, the VIVA Benue and the VIVA Logone were substantially improved in their design, and the timing of the necessary institutional adjustments and the sequencing of the main tasks in the implementation of the projects were clarified. Such support helped ensure that a full analysis of governance of the irrigation subsector was available in order to design the project implementation process and the institutional transformation needed. The reports also inform the government's reform plans for other irrigation schemes in the Adamawa, north, and far north regions of the country.

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