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"Root Causes Not Symptoms": Sustainable Organizational Structures, Réseau de Lutte Contre la Faim: The Decision-Making Process in Combatting Systemic Issues

Ambar Deleon
SIT Study Abroad

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“Root Causes Not Symptoms”: Sustainable Organizational Structures,
Réseau de Lutte Contre la Faim
The Decision-Making Process in Combatting Systemic Issues

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Key Terms: non-governmental organizations, decision-making, systemic approach, sustainability

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Abstract

This paper attempts to understand the basis for how an organization structures itself and their vision. This research draws its focus to the civil society sector in Cameroon, particularly looking at Réseau de Lutte Contre la Faim (RELUFA) and their organizational structure in the battling against systemic issues. The main research question for this study looked at how RELUFA reflects and monitors its performance to keep the organization sustainable in the long-term. For this research the methodology included interviews, observations and secondary resources along with tertiary resources that offered the context for the analytical part of this research. The interviews were advantages as they offered information about the organization, an insight into how the organization itself functioned and how the members that make up this organization understand the systemic approach and the vision talked throughout RELUFA's mission statement and constitution. This led to a fruitful collection of data which supported a few of my hypothesis while expanding and opening new ways of thinking of the others. The data presented is an analysis of RELUFA's organizational structure, systemic approach and decision-making strategies. It includes a discussion on the strengths and weaknesses of the organization, bringing the research forward to answering the question of sustainable organizational structure. RELUFA's organizational structure allows for key actors to shine through and, in turn, it is successful in its systemic approach to finding solutions for the root cause of systemic issues that perpetuate hunger, poverty, and social-, economic- and environmental injustice.

Résumé

Cet article tente de comprendre la base sur laquelle une organisation se structure et sa vision. Cette recherche s'applique au secteur de la société civile au Cameroun, en particulier au Réseau de lutte contre la fraude (RELUFA) et à sa structure organisationnelle dans la lutte contre les problèmes systémiques. La principale question de recherche pour cette étude portait sur la manière dont RELUFA reflète et surveille ses performances afin de maintenir la viabilité de l'organisation sur le long terme. Pour cette recherche, la méthodologie comprenait des entretiens, des observations et des ressources secondaires ainsi que des ressources tertiaires qui ont fourni le contexte pour la partie analytique de cette recherche. Les entretiens ont été des avantages car ils ont fourni des informations sur l'organisation, un aperçu de son fonctionnement et de la manière dont les membres qui la composent comprennent l'approche systémique et la vision exprimée dans la déclaration de mission et la constitution de RELUFA. Cela a conduit à une collecte de données fructueuse qui a conforté quelques-unes de mes hypothèses tout en élargissant et en ouvrant de nouvelles façons de penser des autres. Les données présentées sont une analyse de la structure organisationnelle, de l'approche systémique et des stratégies de prise de décision de RELUFA. Il comprend une discussion sur les forces et les faiblesses de l'organisation, permettant à la recherche de répondre à la question de la structure organisationnelle durable. La structure organisationnelle de RELUFA permet aux acteurs clés de se faire remarquer et, en retour, elle réussit dans son approche systémique à la recherche de solutions à la cause fondamentale de problèmes systémiques qui perpétuent la faim, la pauvreté et les injustices sociales, économiques et environnementales.

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Introduction

“As an alternative conceptualization of possibilities of economic and social development, civil society is becoming an all-encompassing term that refers to social phenomena putatively beyond formal state structures—but not necessarily free of all contact with the state.”¹

The civil society sector is an integral part of any society. The civil society is comprised of organizations and social groups who keep governments accountable. During the past few decades, these organizations have taken a broader role in society, from combatting poverty and hunger to advocating for human rights and environmental protection. These societies have taken to building schools and health clinics, supporting and uplifting communities that have been abandoned or forgotten by their government. But this is not their responsibilities, building schools and acting in behalf of the government is not what civil society organizations are meant to do. So, can those civil society organizations continue to act in this way without burning themselves out? Civil society include non-profit and non-governmental organizations, among others, that have taken on the responsibilities of the public sector, the government. This research will focus on one of these organizations as they combat against systemic issues in Cameroon and their step away from what has become the norm.

Cameroon has a rich history. Initially a German colony, the territory was subsequently divided between France and Britain at the end of World War I. In 1960, the territory controlled by France (La République du Cameroun) gained its independence and, on October 1961, united with British Southern Cameroon to form present-day Cameroon. In West-Central Africa, scholars and political leaders refer to Cameroon as Africa in miniature, being characterized by exceptional

¹ Woods, Dwayne. "Civil Society in Europe and Africa: Limiting State Power through a Public Sphere." *African Studies Review* 35, no. 2 (1992): 77-100.

social, ethnic, and geographical diversity that reflects the continent's diversity.² Since independence, Cameroon has only had two presidents: Ahmadou Ahidjo was the first President of Cameroon, holding office from 1960 until 1982, and Paul Biya, who has been serving as President since 1982, just granted himself another seven-year term in the 2018 elections. President Biya is one of Africa's longest serving presidents whose rule has had both positive and negative effects on Cameroon.

These effects are shown in the environmental and social policies throughout the country. For example, Cameroon has been an oil producing country for many years and have recently opened the mining sector. The host communities would have benefited from the projects too but now stand to lose more because there are not proper mechanisms or independent monitoring to ensure communities are not losing their rights, resources, and lands. Now, even the mining royalties that are allocated to them do not contribute to meaningful social and economic development of their locality.³ Due to the way the administration in Cameroon operates, large stretches of arable land are ceded to agribusinesses for monoculture crops, at the expense of local farmers and the environment. "A complicated mix of traditional rules, local regulations and national land ownership laws, combined with a mingling of personal and corporate interests of political leaders as well as corruption in the administration and the courts renders the local communities vulnerable to land grab."⁴ When all of these issues are put together, it puts food security and food sovereignty of local communities in danger because of the uncertainty and attack to their source of livelihood. Systemic change is needed to help protect vulnerable communities and the environment in Cameroon, but that challenge is being taken on solely by the civil society

² Mbaku, John Mukum. *Culture and Customs of Cameroon*. Culture and Customs of Africa. Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2005.

³ Secondary report on information about RELUFA received on April 8th by Jaff N. Bamenjo.

⁴ Ibid., Secondary report.

in Cameroon. This is not healthy for the growth and durability of the country because all three sectors of society (public, private, and civil) need to work together for the country to function, if they don't, there will not be any effective growth towards systemic change.

Internship

About Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim

The organization I studied during my internship period was Réseau de Lutte contre la Faim (RELUFa) based in Yaoundé, Cameroon. RELUFa was created in 2001 to fight poverty, hunger, and economic, social, and environmental injustice on a national level. It is comprised of members of civil society and grassroots communities with the aims to combat systemic problems that generate and perpetuate the issues stated above in Cameroon. RELUFa is comprised of 13 organizations, 10 founding members and three new member organizations to join the thematic platforms.⁵ RELUFa organizes thematic campaign platforms around monitoring and advocacy groups programs, such as: Extractives Industries Monitoring, Land and Resources Justice, and Food and Trade Justice. RELUFa is a “country-wide network although its campaigns are national, sub regional and international.”⁶ These campaigns were conceived through an inclusive process with all member organizations. Organizations participating in the platforms are the ones to decide who will be their representative at each General Assembly meeting. Various member organizations agree and pursue campaigns based on their competence and relevance of the campaign team in their own activities.⁷

In its organization, RELUFa has two decision-making bodies, the General Assembly and the Board of Directors, and a management body – the National Coordination, who are engaged in

⁵ Secondary report on information about RELUFa received on April 8th by Jaff N. Bamenjo.

⁶ Ibid., secondary report.

⁷ Ibid., secondary report.

the fight against hunger and poverty and the improvement of life conditions for impoverished and marginalized communities. The General Assembly brings together representatives of member organizations and it is the deliberative body with the most extensive power over the substance of the organization.⁸ For example, in 2008 the General Assembly agreed to change the legal status of the network to that of a non-government organization (NGO) to comply with Cameroon's law on funding for organizations.⁹ Additionally, in 2011, the General Assembly further “defined and accepted the hybrid organizational model where the strategies and campaigns designed by the platforms are coordinated by RELUFA's staff.”^{10,11}

Moreover, the Board of Administrators, which follows the General Assembly, “directs and approves the strategies, decides with the Coordination on membership of applying organizations to the various platforms, and supervises the coordination in the execution of the activities.”¹² These members are chosen by the General Assembly for a renewable mandate of four years. Then there is the National Coordination, the body in charge of the “execution of the programs, the organization of the thematic platforms, and the day-to-day running of their activities, and the supervision of RELUFA's staff.”¹³ There will be further discussion of these key players in the decision-making structure in the results and discussion section of this paper.

Reflection of Internship Period

⁸ RELUFA. “Organisation Generale Du RELUFA” Organisation et Fonctionnement, Manuel Des Procedures Internes. Ref. IOGR. 01(2014), p. 15

⁹ Secondary report on information about RELUFA received on April 8th by Jaff N. Bamenjo.

¹⁰ Ibid., secondary report.

¹¹ Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Formal Interview 4: Work Environment, Procedures and Strategies*. 2 May 2019.

¹² Ibid., secondary report.

¹³ Ibid., secondary report.

The quickness in which the internship period went by shocked me. The first day in a new environment is always hard. Not knowing where you stand; how to address anyone; how to dress; how to set up the space in which you'll be spending most of your time in. It's overwhelming. My first day at RELUFA went extremely fast but having to get accustomed to a new setting made everything seem slow. When we first arrived, we were immediately in conversation with one of our superiors, who made me comfortable about coming into RELUFA because he was open and enigmatic. That was a good way to come into the organization. Around 9am, everyone else trickled into the office, all saying hi and going to do their respective duties.

That first day I left with the organization's manual, two documentaries on projects RELUFA monitors or have been a part of, two pamphlets detailing policies and projects RELUFA has worked on with other orgs and the government, an information sheet of RELUFA, and pdfs on environmental law. The research period had officially started for me. At first, I was confident about my research and interning at RELUFA, but as the days pasts and the more readings I did, I began to doubt myself and the direction of my research. Fears mixed with anxiety about being in a new work culture put me off for a while. Fear of not being able to complete my research or have enough time to collect data started to set-in.

After being here for a couple of days, I wanted to make sure my questions made sense and fit into the environment I have been observing. Going over the interview questions was good as it brought me back into what exactly I wanted to know about RELUFA. From day one, I had been given a lot of information not only pertaining to my research but also information that might shift my focus a bit. After reviewing and editing my interview questions, I started looking for more readings on organizational structures, systemic approach, and the psychology of decision-making.

Research Project

Literature Review

The decision-making process is an integral part in the structure of any organization, whether they are fighting for land justice or protesting human rights violations. Since the establishment of the first non-governmental organization (NGO), they have become the key actors in responding to poverty, hunger, homelessness and the list continues. While explaining the structure of government and analyzing major development NGOs in Bangladesh, M. Shamsul Haque depicts them as followed:

Although NGOs are often identified with powerless groups, they themselves have become powerful and influential, especially because of their external sources of financial support, cooperation, and advocacy.¹⁴

As the NGO sector expanded, many organizations started tackling the same issues but developed different strategies for how their organization would function and combat these issues. Due to the continuing increase of this organizations to the point that they have become common, Haque detailed a “convenient way to classify NGOs...to focus on their primary objectives and functions.”¹⁵ These classifications frequently overlap but each NGO has its special niche in the way it functions and operates, starting with its organizational structure.

The way an organization is structured can have a big effect on their longevity and the impact they have on the problems they are trying to solve. One of the key elements to a sustainable organization is their decision-making process. With globalization and technological

¹⁴ Haque, M. Shamsul. "The Changing Balance of Power between the Government and NGOs in Bangladesh." *International Political Science Review / Revue Internationale De Science Politique* 23, no. 4 p. 411

¹⁵ Haque, "The Changing Balance of Power between the Government and NGOs in Bangladesh" (2002), p. 415

advancements, the way NGOs communicate with one another is easier and faster than when NGOs were first recognized. This was best put into context by J.J. Welling in “Non-Governmental Organizations, Prevention, and Intervention in Internal Conflict: Through the Lens of Darfur”, where they explained how globalization has influenced the way NGOs operate: “first, the amount of communication among NGOs is increasing. Second, NGO activity is expanding due to the increased volume and affordability of communication in the last ten years.”¹⁶ Kathleen M. Eisenhardt illustrates how these changes have affected the way people, management teams, make choices and strategies in “Speed and Strategic Choice: How Managers Accelerate Decision Making.” She described how timeline to create strategies are changing as the “premium now is on moving fast and keeping pace. More than ever...the best strategies are irrelevant if they take too long to formulate.”¹⁷ NGOs are constantly fighting against this clock, but it does not mean that they have taken out the base of their strategy, the communities. Although Eisenhardt is right about the quickness in which decisions need to be made, there can be errors or things left behind when going through the decision-making process too quickly.

In conversation with Eisenhardt, Danny Burns offers an alternative to this form of decision-making in “Systemic Action Research in Policy and Politics”, where he explained how embedding action research into the decision-making process allows for another framework but requires the organization to focus on the direction and core values rather than trying to anticipate all the details regarding the implementation of a project.¹⁸ Burns goes further to say that systemic action research has to be constructed as part of the management and leadership process, it cannot

¹⁶ Welling, J. J. “Non-Governmental Organizations, Prevention, and Intervention in Internal Conflict: Through the Lens of Darfur.” *Indiana Journal of Global Legal Studies* 14, no. 1 (2007): 147–79.

¹⁷ Eisenhardt, Kathleen M. “Speed and Strategic Choice: How Managers Accelerate Decision Making.” *California Management Review* 32, no. 3 (1990): 39–54.

¹⁸ Burns, Danny. “Systemic Action Research in Policy and Politics.” In *Systemic Action Research*, 1st ed., 173–78. A Strategy for Whole System Change. Bristol University Press, (2007). p. 173

be left on its own.¹⁹ In his formulation of this alternative form to decision-making, Burns places public participation outside the decision-making process. Where there is an assumption that public participation is in the process, Burns pushes back on this and states how “decisions frequently emerge from action, and in action, [therefore] the most effective participation strategies will often be those that engage people in action, not in decision making.”²⁰ This idea contradicts that of Dieudonné Bitondo who, a few years prior, discussed the importance of public consultation and participation in his summary of the evolution of the legal and institutional framework and the practice of environmental assessment (EA) in Cameroon.²¹ Bitondo discussed how public participation made the report on the Moong dam a collective product, having played a decisive role in the achievement of the results in his study.²² Bitondo goes on to say that public consultation should also “cover the views of the public on the project itself, its impact on the environment in general, its usefulness as well as its planning. It should be able to influence the design of the project.”²³

Furthermore, this train of thought goes a long way to helping communities build themselves up as it depends on communities at every level of the process. In Chapter 3 of the “Promoting Land Rights in Africa: How Do NGOs Make a Difference?” report, Nazneen Kanji et al. illustrate how “the nature of the services provided by [some] NGOs has changed from more welfarist service delivery to helping communities promote their own interests and meet their own needs.”²⁴ This is not true for all organizations but the shifts from welfarist service to helping

¹⁹ Burns. “Systemic Action Research in Policy and Politics” (2007), p. 173

²⁰ Ibid., p. 177

²¹ Bitondo, Dieudonné. “Environmental assessment in Cameroon: state of the art.” *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 18:1(2000), 33-42

²² Bitondo, Dieudonné. “Environmental assessment in Cameroon: state of the art” (2000), p. 37

²³ Ibid., p. 38

²⁴ Kanji, Nazneen, Carla Braga, and Winnie Mitullah. “NGOs in the policy process: Roles and relationships”. *Promoting Land Rights in Africa: How Do NGOs Make a Difference? Report*. International Institute for Environment and Development, (2002), p. 13

communities claim their own rights points to the increasing rate for this organizations to start fighting against the root causes, leaving tools communities can use themselves, instead of just handing out aid for short-term relief. This shift is also shown in the ways in which organizations are structuring themselves and their role in the broader picture of events. The way an organization is structured influences which direction they take when strategizing for their decision-making process. This research will be an in-depth study of RELUFA's own organizational structure and their decision-making process. RELUFA functions within a context that places a lot of responsibility on the civil society sector in Cameroon. A study of their organizational structure is important as RELUFA offers different methods and strategies for combatting against systemic issues.

Based on my preliminary research and readings on RELUFA, its objectives and mission, the following are my initial main research question and sub-research questions that first guided this research; and the preliminary hypothesis that will be explored and analyzed throughout the research period:

Main Research Question

How does RELUFA reflect and monitors its performance to keep the organization sustainable long-term?

Hypothesis: RELUFA explores different methods to reflect and monitor on projects and organizational responsibilities including self-assessments and internal evaluations.

Sub Research Questions

How does RELUFA's decision-making strategy change with Cameroon's political climate in terms of environmental policies and regulations?

Hypothesis: The decision-making strategy in RELUFA change in terms of approach and timing to best fit Cameroon's political climate that is impacting the ways in which RELUFA promotes and advocates for environmental policies and regulations.

What kinds of strategy does RELUFA implement to make relevant, long-lasting, solutions to systemic problems?

Hypothesis: By using various modes of planning, organizing, and time management, RELUFA can keep its research relevant and up-to-date. As a result, they can make rational recommendations and studies that contribute to issues they advocate for in a realistic time frame.

How does the relationship between the government and RELUFA affect their systemic approach to systemic issues of land, poverty, and hunger?

Hypothesis: The relationship between the government and RELUFA does affect the ways RELUFA is able to approach systemic issues by influencing the language in policies, the timeline for project implementation, and the ways in which RELUFA can advocate solutions and change.

What factors are considered when reaching a final decision on projects and activities that will be promoted and advocated?

Hypothesis: RELUFA considers the local realities of each community, durability of the project, its timeline, and both the negative and positive impacts the activities may have in the long term when reaching its final decisions.

Methodology

The methods I choose for my study are interviews, observations, and supplementary resources/reports provided by RELUFA for this research. As my research focuses more on the decision-making process and systemic approach used in RELUFA, I conducted a series of interviews that offered the most information on the whys and how of these processes. The interviews allowed me to see how the people who make up RELUFA make the decisions they do and what influences those decisions; overall, the interviews demonstrated how much the staff and the key players in the decision-making bodies understand their own approach to combating systemic issues. My target population are RELUFA staff members, members of the decision-making bodies, and people involved in RELUFA's decision-making process.

The interviews were complimentary to observations that were useful in learning how the staff interacts with one another, their forms of communication and teamwork. This helped in my understanding of the dynamics of the organization and how everyone works together under a single mission. The observations and interviews were supplemented by reports and readings provided by Mr. Jaff N. Bamenjo, my advisor at RELUFA. The reports were key in providing important information for the research, specifically the context in which the decision-making process is taking place as well as offering a deeper understanding of the organization.

For my qualitative data analysis, my technique consisted of data preparation and identifying common themes from the interviews and observations. When identifying common themes, I categorized and coded the patterns seen throughout the data collected, grouping as needed. Data preparations included data validation, cross-referencing information, data editing—making sure the information is clear and understandable, and data coding-grouping. After data preparation, the coding was used to chart and analyze the results.

One of the major challenges of this project was the time constraint of four weeks. It was easy to plan out the research period but once in it, it became harder to translate that timeline into reality. I felt like there needed to be a time to just settle in and get accustomed to the work environment before the research period started, a time where only observations were being done. The timeline does limit the scope of the research as more time would have allowed for a broader target population as I was unable to interview other stakeholders such as communities who have or had worked with RELUFA. Also, the environmental constraint as an American student studying abroad where I was unable to travel due to safety measures as well as the timing of the project. Due to the limited amount of time, it was difficult to participate in data collection activities in communities being done by the staff at RELUFA because of the traveling it had required.

Ethics

When entering RELUFA, professional manners, emotional concerns, and consent for data collection were the main factors that I carried throughout my research. I reflected on the ethical concerns throughout my time at RELUFA and follow the code of conduct set by RELUFA to better perform in, and understand, the work culture and norms which make up the atmosphere at RELUFA. I made sure to be aware of the emotional concerns of the staff I will be working closely with when it comes to my research; taking them into account not only during interviews but all through my observations and research studies. Additionally, I followed both SIT and RELUFA's ethics policies when conducting interviews, making sure I go over the with each participant their rights to confidentiality and anonymity, as well as giving consent for the information they provide to be used in the paper.

Positionality

Recognizing that as an American student studying abroad in Cameroon, I have my own personal experiences and cultural values that influenced the way I interacted with my environment and my research at RELUFA. I believe it is important for me to acknowledge that there is no one objective reality and my participants had their own realities and cultural values that inform the way they interacted with me and my research. I was aware that my liberal arts background and American perspective made me more inclined to one perspective over another when conducting interviews and follow-up conversations.

The way I overcame this was by applying the context learned from the reports given to me by my advisor, Jaff N. Bamenjo, at RELUFA and making sure my personal views do not overpower those of the research. I was aware of my positionality when approaching the staff at RELUFA and partner organizations. Transparency, honesty, and respect were pillars to how I conducted myself and reflected on my positionality at RELUFA.

Presentation of Data and Analysis

Organizational Structure and Strategies for the Decision-Making Process

The research showed that for RELUFA, what it means to have a systemic approach to an issue is to look at a system in its totality, its complexity, and its own dynamics.²⁵ There is a level of self-reflection and accountability that shines through the work done at the organization. The

²⁵ Rosnay, J. "Analytic vs. Systemic Approaches", in: F. Heylighen, C. Joslyn and V. Turchin (editors): Principia Cybernetica Web (Principia Cybernetica, Brussels), 1997: URL: <http://pespmc1.vub.ac.be/ANALYSYST.html>

communication between the members of RELUFA is direct and strong. This form of operation was set in place from the origins of the organization in 2001 with the first members of the organization who understood the vision for RELUFA. Samuel Nguiffo, the Secretary General of CED (a member organization in the network), described the first gathering of the organization and how clear the vision to address the root causes was instead of just treating the symptoms.²⁶ Nguiffo stated that some people left as “they were not really accepting the vision of the organization when it started functioning, for me it means they did not understand the vision when it was described.”²⁷ This is important because the design for RELUFA was “not to address, to try to solve the symptoms, but to address the root causes. And this is important because very often most organizations treat the symptoms.”²⁸ And this is correct, with the expansion of the NGO sector in Africa, many organizations often only give out food or other aids but do not try to ask the underlining causes of these issues. Nguiffo says that this is because these organizations are in a comfort zone, giving aid and providing services but not conveying any messages or addressing the structural causes. Instead of looking for a short-term solution to only treat the symptoms, i.e. giving food aid, it is important to address the root causes of why the food aid is needed and implement long-lasting systemic solutions that benefits and empowers affected communities.

RELUFA is an organization that functions to address and push back against the structural hunger in Cameroon through their focus on food sovereignty, equity and transparency in the extractives industries, and land justice. Through their hybrid organizational model, the strategies and campaigns designed to combat these issues are coordinated by RELUFA’s staff, meaning that there is a clear plan of communication throughout the process and the following of the vision.

²⁶ CED: Centre pour l’Environnement et le Developpement

²⁷ Nguiffo, Samuel. *Interview 5: Partner Organization and RELUFA*. 30 April 2019.

²⁸ Nguiffo, *Interview 5*. 30 April 2019.

Therefore, the functioning and effectiveness of the decision-making bodies at RELUFA is crucial because its design is very particular in what is being addressed and the role the organization plays in the broader picture.

As aforementioned, RELUFA has two decision-making bodies, the General Assembly (Assemblée Générale) and the

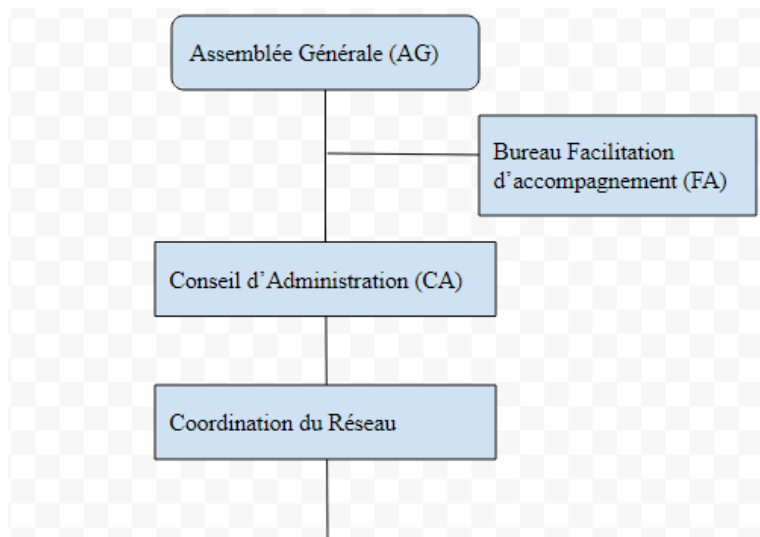


Figure 1. Schematic Organogram of RELUFA, sectioned. RELUFA. "Organisation Generale Du RELUFA" Organisation et Fonctionnement, Manuel Des Procedures Internes. Réf. IOGR. 02, pg. 16

Board of Administrators (Conseil d'Administration), and a management body – the National Coordination (Coordination du Réseau) as seen on Figure 1. These decision-making bodies are responsible for the substance of the organization and offer a model for how the organization should function. As Nguiffo stated, it is important for the actors around the table that makes up RELUFA's network to be able to understand and agree with the purpose of the organization. Reports of General Assembly meetings, the constitution of RELUFA, and presentation given at a Board of Administrators' meeting show that understanding and the reflection on aims and objectives of the organization throughout its origins and the transformation into the thematic campaign platforms around monitoring and advocacy groups programs. A very important part for keeping this level of understanding is how the organization is built, in terms of members and staff. For example, the Board of Administrators members are chosen by the General Assembly for a renewable mandate of four years.²⁹ This means the members can be replaced and new ideas and perspectives can be brought in if someone does not renew or wish to continue being a member of the Board. Then

²⁹ Secondary report on information about RELUFA received on April 8th by Jaff N. Bamenjo.

there is the network Coordinator who is appointed based on competence and supervised and evaluated by the Board of Administrators and the Board's recommendations in this regard are then approved by the General Assembly.³⁰ There is a level of accountability and check and balances at RELUFA that keeps it present and functioning effectively throughout their thematic campaigns and their work in Cameroon.

Based on the information gained for this research, RELUFA would fall under adaptive organizations category present by Dhiren N. Panchal in their review of Daniel Katz & Robert Khan's book, *The Social Psychology of Organizations*. Panchal summarized that "these are organizations intended to create knowledge, innovative solutions to problems, and the like."³¹ Interviews with Jaff N. Bamenjo and Sandrine Kouba showed how RELUFA works to find innovative solutions to systemic issues. Kouba and Bamenjo both talked about the community grain banks in the Far North Region of Cameroon "who suffer from recurrent food shortages due to poverty and speculation mechanism on the grain market."³² The systemic problem they were looking at was managing existing stock of food and the community grain bank was the solution proposed by the community and a member organization, Gie Adersa, at a General Assembly meeting.³³ The way it works is: members of the community borrow during the lean period (June-September in the Far North Region) and reimburse during the harvest period. RELUFA's role is to help with rotating stocks and looking for funding to build durable structures.³⁴ By July 2014, there were 27 durable storage facilities constructed with funding from the Japanese Embassy and

³⁰ Ibid., Secondary report.

³¹ Katz, Daniel, and Kahn, Robert L. Reviewed by Dhiren N Panchal. *The Social Psychology of Organizations*. John Wiley and Sons, New York. 1966.

³² Secondary report on information about RELUFA received on April 8th by Jaff N. Bamenjo.

³³ Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Informal Interview 1: Setting Up the Context of RELUFA*. 8 April 2019.

³⁴ Bamenjo. *Informal Interview 1*. 2019

PHP (the company of Plantations du Haut-Penja).³⁵ Bamenjo explained how there are now 45 villages with community grain banks, and some well managed grain banks have been growing in stocks. Making it clear that the growth of community grain banks is not for the purpose of expanding but to show the government that this innovative system works, pushing for them to reflect on this sustainable solution.³⁶ This is a well-rounded approach to the issue of hunger and the model itself benefits the community in various ways such as keeping men in their communities as they no longer need to abandon their families to go to the towns looking for money to buy food.³⁷

These types of projects are what make RELUFA an adaptive organization, as it looks to combat not only the surface level issue but also the root causes. When talking about the organization’s mission and objectives, the coordinators of RELUFA and one of their partner organizations were consistent in their responses:

INTERVIEWEES	RESPONSES
<p>JAFF N. BAMENJO <i>COORDINATOR OF RELUFA</i></p>	<p>“Now, RELUFA and these community grain banks are in 45 villages. This is not because it wants to expand and expand, but to show the government that this system works...better to reflect on sustainable solution...Systemic solutions for the root cause, not treating the symptoms.”</p>

³⁵ Secondary report. *RELUFA Organization Update: Board of Director’s Meeting, July 11, 2014*. Received from Jaff N. Bamenjo on 16 April 2019.

³⁶ Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Informal Interview 1: Setting Up the Context of RELUFA*. 8 April 2019.

³⁷ Kouba, Sandrine. “La Banque de Céréales communautaire: Potentiel Filet Social De Sécurité Alimentaire Pour La Région de L’Extrême-Nord Du Cameroun” RELUFA. Oct 2016.; Secondary report on information about RELUFA received on April 8th by Jaff N. Bamenjo.

<p>SANDRINE KOUBA PROGRAM COORDINATOR AT RELUFA</p>	<p>“But now when we come back, we try to analyze the problem, then we go back to them in order to clarify the understanding of the problem and of the root cause.”</p>
<p>SAMUEL NGUIFFO SECRETARY GENERAL OF CED</p>	<p>“At the end of the day, all that could be summarized into the systemic and structural creation of hunger is the problem. So, if you want to do something, it is to address that...not by providing food aid. No, but by fighting the root causes of this hunger, structural hunger. So, the network was established as a network with organizations around the table, members...”</p>

To fight against the root causes of problems plaguing many communities in Cameroon, RELUFA must understand themselves, their objectives, and their overall goal when advocating for systemic change. The structure and communication of their values and vision is strong at RELUFA as each member of the team understands the vision and are able to explain its systemic approach through their activities and advocacy work. Lack of communication and vision are causes of failures for many organizations looking to promote change. RELUFA sets an example for the type of strategies that need to be implemented not just in their organization, but also in the ways they interact with their partner organizations and the communities they wish to support and advocate with.

Another way in which RELUFA tackles “fighting the root causes of this structural hunger”, is through the model they use in their decision-making process that includes communities and their local civil society organizations.³⁸ The decision-making process is not a strict period of time that goes from point A to B, but a process that takes observations, research, and dialogues at its origins starting with communities and local organizations. These are the organizations that are in constant

³⁸ Nguiffo, Samuel. *Interview 5: Partner Organization and RELUFA*. 30 April 2019.

interactions with the communities and offer RELUFA a different viewpoint than the one they have from a national level. Ideas for programs and projects are brought in through the General Assembly which is constituted by “various organizations coming from other regions of Cameroon” who are situated in their local realities.³⁹ As RELUFA tries to tackle systemic issues, they are looking to understand these problems by communicating with the communities being affected. Communities play a large role in the decision-making process at RELUFA and the research showed how important their input is to the effectiveness of the activities and projects RELUFA helps to implement.

Communities in RELUFA’s Systemic Approach

The independence of Cameroon and unification of the both British and French territories brought the promise of peace and development. But in the mist of new-found independence and power, many laws were left vague and to the interpretation of those in power. This allowed for marginalization of communities throughout Cameroon, causing food, land, and water insecurity. Today we see more communities were losing their voice in the decisions being made by those in power. Civil society organizations are in the fight against these injustices but they each have their own approach to supporting and protecting these communities. RELUFA is one of these organizations combating against systemic issues in Cameroon. For RELUFA, their systemic approach—the way they tackle complex and dynamic issues—include their number one priority, the communities. Listening and supporting the communities through the community’s own way. The interviews for this research showed how important community voices are for the work RELUFA does from project implementation to the mediation process where the “community

³⁹ Kouba, Sandrine. *Interview 2: Community and Projects*. 11 April 2019.

makes the choice of mediation.”⁴⁰ Below are a few of those remarks that illustrate RELUFA’s commitment to the communities they assist.

INTERVIEWEES	RESPONSES
<p>CHRISTIAN ANANGUE <i>RESPONSIBLE FOR THE EXTRACTIVE INDUSTRY PROGRAM</i></p>	<p>“...the discussion between the company and the community because the state ordered...the discussion. In the platform of discussion, we have the company, the community, we have the state, the government, we have the civil society, and we have the mediation—the community make the choice of mediation.”</p>
<p>SANDRINE KOUBA <i>PROGRAM COORDINATOR AT RELUFA</i></p>	<p>“So, in terms of advocacy, we are trying to identify problems and to understand what the root causes of this problem are. So, our relationship with the community are mostly consultation: what are the problems? what can be the solutions? what do you think about the activities?”</p>
<p>SAMUEL NGUIFFO <i>SECRETARY GENERAL OF CED</i></p>	<p>“And by working with them, we try to build their capacity so that they can do it on their own on the long term, so that we don’t have to keep going there because we also have a very limited team.”</p>

⁴⁰ Anangue, Christian. *Interview 3: Extractive Industry and Mediations*. 16 April 2019.

By including communities in their decision-making process, RELUFA is helping them promote their own interests and meet their own needs.⁴¹ The relationship with the communities is, as Kouba stated, “mostly consultation”-based, and this is good because it allows communities and national-level organizations such as RELUFA to be at the same level of authority.⁴² The role of communities in RELUFA’s systemic approach is crucial as they provide key information for activities and projects that RELUFA might implement in their communities. Kouba describes it perfectly in accordance with Bitondo by stating:

*I can say that they are at the first level but the first level because they are the ones to give information on the problem. But now when we come back, we try to analyze the problem, then we go back to them in order to clarify the understanding of the problem and of the root cause. This is where they have a big role. I think they are at the first level because they are the ones to give the first information, the first data, that we need to do the advocacy.*⁴³

Bitondo analyzed the ways in which public participation (community voices) needs to influence the design and planning of the projects/activities that will affect them.⁴⁴ These conversations give insight into the problems in the region and the ways in which the community believes can be fixed. “What are the problems? What can be the solutions? What do you think about the activities?”⁴⁵

⁴¹ Kanji, Nazneen, Carla Braga, and Winnie Mitullah. “NGOs in the policy process: Roles and relationships”. Promoting Land Rights in Africa: How Do NGOs Make a Difference? Report. International Institute for Environment and Development, 2002. 13-22.

⁴² Kouba, Sandrine. *Interview 2: Community and Projects*. 11 April 2019.

⁴³ Kouba. *Interview 2*. 11 April 2019.

⁴⁴ Bitondo, Dieudonné. “Environmental assessment in Cameroon: state of the art.” *Impact Assessment and Project Appraisal*, 18:1(2000), p. 35

⁴⁵ Kouba, Sandrine. *Interview 2: Community and Projects*. 11 April 2019.

These are a few of the questions asked to communities. They might seem simple enough but questions like these are the ones that show communities that their voices matter, and more so, their ideas for solutions are valued. The way RELUFA is structured understands the need to have these communities in agreement with the projects and activities the organization would like to do and support. At the end of the day, communities are the ones that will continue the projects/activities themselves and continue to advocate for their rights after the organization has finished their work. If they do not understand the purpose of the project, then they will not be excited or motivated to see it through. For example, for the community grain banks in the Far North Region, the community were the ones to give the idea of how it would function in their community from accountability to the management of reimbursements.⁴⁶ These communities saw the value of the community grain banks, recognized its purpose, and were motivated to see it succeed. This is how effective systemic change is done. It looks at all the actors in the system and does not only adhere to one voice but to the voices of a whole community. RELUFA's systemic approach functions well because they follow that simple rule—listen and understand the communities you wish to support and advocate with. They are partners who together are battling the systemic problems that perpetuate issues of hunger, poverty, and economic, social, and environmental injustice.

Sustainable Organizational Structure: The Limitations and Strengths in RELUFA's Systemic Approach

The “Statuts du Réseau de Lutte Contre La Faim” states RELUFA was created for an unlimited duration as there is no timeline for when the issues they are fighting against will be

⁴⁶ Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Informal Interview 1: Setting Up the Context of RELUFA*. 8 April 2019.

completely solved.⁴⁷ Although, there are some factors in the way RELUFA is structured that might affect the limitlessness of the organization's duration. Questions about RELUFA's systemic approach that were brought up throughout the research included: how effective is RELUFA's systemic approach? How effective is this approach in the long term?

The data showed a few limitations that can hinder the capacity of RELUFA to perform at its fullest and be able to sustain itself and its projects. One of them was RELUFA's lack of a clear exit strategy for their projects and activities. Bamenjo described how RELUFA does not have just one exit strategy, stating "we don't have just one common exit strategy. It depends on the project and how the project ended."⁴⁸ For instance, it is not sustainable for RELUFA to remain involved in the community grain banks but there is no clear exit strategy. The recommendation given during a Board meeting presentation in 2014 was for RELUFA to facilitate an exit strategy and cease their involvement in the project.⁴⁹ Not having a clear exit strategy that is communicated to the community aside from the project proposal timeline will only limit the number of projects RELUFA can do at the same capacity. Although, this has also been a point of growth for RELUFA as well because they have developed the way they reflect and go about projects such as the community grain banks. Kouba explained how back when the project first started in 2006, they did not think about the exit strategy as they did not have the experience yet with these types of projects.⁵⁰ Kouba stated how "it is now that [they] are reflecting on how to have a good exit strategy in order to help [those communities] to continue without" RELUFA.⁵¹ Understanding that

⁴⁷ "Statuts du Reseau de Lutte Contre la Faim." Yaounde: Feb 2011. Secondary Report received from Jaff N. Bamenjo on 16 April 2019.

⁴⁸ Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Formal Interview 4: Work Environment, Procedures and Strategies*. 2 May 2019.

⁴⁹ Secondary report. *RELUFA Organization Update: Board of Director's Meeting, July 11, 2014*. Received from Jaff N. Bamenjo on 16 April 2019.

⁵⁰ Kouba, Sandrine. *Interview 2: Community and Projects*. 11 April 2019.

⁵¹ Kouba. *Interview 2*. 11 April 2019.

there are times when those exit strategies would not be used because of circumstances in the project. A great example of this was RELUFA's work with the FAIR Fruit project involving local farmers who were forced off their land by a transnational company. Through negotiation, a settlement was reached and "the exit strategy was determined by the negotiation and what the communities wanted."⁵² It is understandable to want to tailor each exit strategy to the project and the community, but a plan should be in place as a safety precaution for the organization, its donors, and the communities. Furthermore, this connects to RELUFA's other limitation: funding.

Like many organizations in the civil society, RELUFA depends on external financial support in order to be able to do the projects they want to do. This limits the projects and research they are interested in working in because of how donors and funding functions within the civil society. When donors "launch the call for proposal, they have already some criteria [and] if you are not eligible to these criteria, you cannot access the funds."⁵³ In this way donors already have "an authority on what [RELUFA] has to do" even if RELUFA would like to work on another topic, they are obligated to follow the criteria set by the donors to have access to the funds.⁵⁴ This limits the ways in which they can implement their systemic approach because they are restricted by some of these criteria. Although a solution has been proposed and is already in motion to have a bit more room in terms of funding. The idea that has been applied at the organization is a reserve fund through the participation of staff. Bamenjo explained why this was important:

"I think that it is a very good idea for the organization because there are moments we don't have funding but at least we have to continue to exist, so having a reserve fund is to say okay, moments might be difficult when there is no funding but at least the project, the organization, will

⁵² Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Formal Interview 4: Work Environment, Procedures and Strategies*. 2 May 2019.

⁵³ Kouba, Sandrine. *Interview 2: Community and Projects*. 11 April 2019.

⁵⁴ Kouba. *Interview 2*. 11 April 2019.

not stop function, at least we will still have some reserves to continue carrying out the activities and also pay staff salaries.”⁵⁵

This shows that there are ideas being applied throughout the organization in order to not let those limitations with funding stop the work that needs to be done.

There are also external factors such as the political climate in Cameroon which hinders where RELUFA can go and do research or activities in. Due to these factors, plans get shifted around and pilot sites need to be changed because of security risks. For example, Kouba described how this is very difficult because they “have a project now, LandCam, and there was a pilot site in the South West Region, but now [they] are obliged to just leave it like that—RELUFA cannot go there for security reasons and we are obliged to look at other pilot sites who can have the same challenges that we wanted to study there.”⁵⁶ Circumstances such as that one can limit where and when RELUFA can implement their systemic approach and be fruitful in its endeavors.

Weaknesses turn into failures when left unchecked. As far as June 2014, RELUFA’s decision-making bodies have taken an approach that convey the unlimited nature that they want for the organization. This comes through their reflection on their activities and projects, and self-assessment methods for the internal operations of RELUFA. The limitations stated above fail in comparison to the strengths within RELUFA’s systemic approach. Vision-driven and community oriented are two great qualities that RELUFA possesses and it strengthens their ability to communicate and implement effective advocacy campaigns and activities. Due to their work and research around Cameroon and internationally, RELUFA has a very respected reputation to the point where the government is asking them to do consultation work. This is important to not because of the relationship between civil society organizations and the government in Cameroon.

⁵⁵ Bamenjo, Jaff N. *Formal Interview 4: Work Environment, Procedures and Strategies*. 2 May 2019.

⁵⁶ Kouba. *Interview 2*. 11 April 2019.

A key strength in RELUFA's systemic approach are their relationship with the communities they assist and their partner organizations. Burns states that the "most effective participation strategies will often be those that engage people in action, not in decision making".⁵⁷ In compromising with Burns idea of how organizations can develop a systemic perspective, RELUFA does not only include the communities in the decision-making process but is very effective in engaging people in the action steps that come from those meetings. One of the biggest advantages RELUFA has is that there is not only RELUFA the national-level organization but member organizations that come together under a similar mission. These member organizations understand the vision of RELUFA because of the clear and direct communication throughout. Environment at the



Figure 2. Picture of yearlong projections of deadlines for items in three categories: Research, innovations, Lessons; Dialogues; and Capacity Building.

office is very welcoming and open but there is a cohesive message being sent. Right away, one can see the main goals and priorities of RELUFA. From the multiple illustrations of land monitoring in Cameroon to a big poster filled with deadlines and ideas, these items set the atmosphere at RELUFA. This atmosphere is then translated onto reports and presentations that show how strong those interactions are between staff, with partner organizations, and the communities being assisted.

Conclusions

⁵⁷ Burns, Danny. "Systemic Action Research in Policy and Politics." In *Systemic Action Research*, 1st ed. A Strategy for Whole System Change. Bristol University Press, 2007, p. 177

As civil society organizations have become this all-encompassing phenomenon throughout the past few decades, the structures these organizations present illustrate an image of power and opposition to that of the government (public sector). This is not necessarily true as civil society organizations are not entirely disconnected from the sphere of the state, or government, with whom they are working sometimes with or against. This means that even though we think of civil society as its own entity, they are still in communication with the state, they are still in relation with the public sector. This research looked at how a civil society organization structured itself to break away from the new norm for this sector. The new norm being civil society actors taking on the responsibilities and duties of the government. This research focuses on how an organization can have an innovative structure to break away from those norms and systematically fight against the issues that continue to perpetuate hunger, poverty, and social, economic and environmental injustice in Cameroon. RELUFA has a unique way of presenting themselves and their vision and this is shown throughout the researching of their systemic approach and decision-making process. The work of RELUFA is centered around three core values which are seen throughout their interactions with communities and partner organizations. These core values are: integrity, dedication, and creativity.

The main research question for this study looked at how RELUFA reflects and monitors its performance to keep the organization sustainable in the long-term. This focused on the systemic approach of RELUFA and how they used their approach to continue to move forward throughout their creation, transformation, and current presence in Cameroon. The sub-research questions focused more on the decision-making process, RELUFA's relationship with the government, and the factors used for projects and activities implemented in communities. Ultimately my research came down to two simple questions: Is it sustainable? Can this organization continue to thrive

under its current structure? From internal reflections to their connection to the communities they assist, RELUFA draws on various methods of data collection, assessments, and project implementation. The data showed that RELUFA's systemic approach is so effective because they look at the issues they are fighting against in its totality. Researching and analyzing the complexity of the problem and its own dynamic within the broader system. This means that they are not looking solely at the symptoms but at the root causes by asking key questions, such as: why is this happening? Why has this problem worsened? Why is it important to draw focus to it? For projects and activities to be successful and organizations to be sustainable, it is crucial to have a systemic perspective and, because of this model of focusing on the root causes, RELUFA can portray that clearly.

This research the importance of self-reflection and accountability in an organization. Self-reflection and accountability mean that RELUFA is very self-aware of where it stands in the civil society sector, their approach to other organizations, and how they interact with the communities they want to assist. Due to this self-awareness, their communication with partner organizations, member organizations, and communities is very strong. The data showed that there is a clear line of communication between RELUFA—its vision—, their partners, and the communities. The interviews detailed how the partner organization also understand RELUFA's systemic approach and can clearly state what RELUFA's vision is. This is important because this well-rounded understanding between RELUFA and its partners means that when member organizations go into communities RELUFA is looking to make a connection with, the communities are being given the same message and vision that is presented at the national-level. This illustrates the effectiveness of the organizational structure and why RELUFA is able to be an adaptive organization, one that

can adapt itself into the communities they go into. Thus, any project or activities that are introduced to a community either it's tailored for that community or it is presented by the community itself.

To conclude, even with the limitations in its systemic approach, RELUFA illustrates how important it is for organizations to look at the root causes of the issues they are trying to fight against and pay attention to what the communities are saying. Those communities come first in the decision-making process and stay throughout the implementation of advocacy campaigns, project, and/or activities. This does not mean that those limitations should go unchecked but that there needs to be more discussion about how to make them into strengths for the long-term durability of the organization. Finally, research such as this one are important to do because of where our societies are right now, the uncertainty of governments (the instability); and knowing how organizations that are helping marginalized communities are structured and function can help provide some clarity and hope to being able to find creative and innovative solutions to systemic issues.

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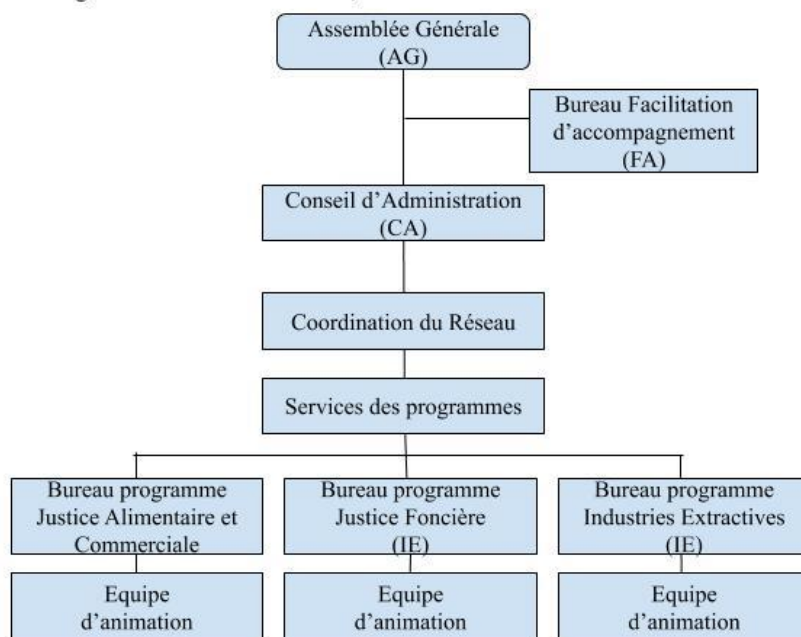
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Appendix

Appendix 1. Model received from RELUFA's Manual of Internal Procedures

Figure 1. Organigramme Schématique du RELUFA; RELUFA. "Organisation Generale Du RELUFA" Organisation et Fonctionnement, Manuel Des Procédures Internes. Réf. IOGR. 02, p. 16



Appendix 2: Initial Interview Questions

2.1. Staff

1. How many years have you been at RELUFA?
2. What projects have you been involved in at RELUFA?
3. What is your understanding of systemic approach?
4. What factors are considered when reaching a final decision?
5. Who is involved in the final stages of the decision-making process?
6. When are the community members brought into the decision-making process?
7. How are decisions implemented?

2.2. Partner Organization

1. When was your organization founded?
2. What are your aims and objectives?
3. How long has your organization been collaborating with RELUFA?

4. How would you describe this relationship?
5. What factors do you consider before partnering with other organizations?
6. What projects has your organization work on with RELUFA?
7. How would you describe RELUFA's systemic approach?
8. How does RELUFA's approach differ, if any, from that of your organization?

2.3. Coordinator of RELUFA

1. Looking back at past AG meeting reports, can you explain the work environment when first starting?
2. Who were invited to the transition meetings?
3. How were people kept accountable during those earlier years?
4. How are members kept accountable now?
5. What does the internal evaluation process look like? Who is involved? How long between evaluations?
6. When are external auditors brought in?
7. Who is responsible for overseeing the evaluation process?
8. Are partner organizations brought into the evaluation process? Feedback?
9. How are final reports presented to member organizations?
10. After a study or project is completed, what is RELUFA's exit strategy?
11. How would that transition go? Are there any workshops, preparations?