



Livelihood Survival Strategies in Declining Towns of Sub Saharan Africa: Evidence from Nkongsamba, Cameroon

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Abstract: Sub Saharan Africa's economic meltdown which could be traced from the 1980s had a toll on export agriculture which served as a springboard for some urban economies. Such an economic malaise was greeted by a loss of urban vitality leading to urban decline. Ever since this unwanted phenomenon crept into the urban scene, urban geographers have largely focused on analyzing the processes leading to urban decline with a view of suggesting ways of revitalizing the urban environment. However, an important aspect which seemed to have eluded urban geographical literature or better still remains insufficient, concerns scientific perspectives on the livelihood survival strategies employed by urban residents in the face of decline. This is particularly true for the historic town of Nkongsamba which was hitherto ranked among the leading towns in Cameroon. The town witnessed a significant decline in its vitality which is largely attributed to the decline in the crop (coffee) export sector. This has precipitated the introduction of alternative livelihood survival strategies by the urban residents. Using a systematic sampling of 120 respondents drawn from the diverse livelihood sectors, complemented by in-depth interviews, field observations and secondary data, we analyse the current livelihood survival strategies of the population and their future perspectives. Our analysis lead us to the conclusion that the numerous livelihood strategies adopted (a switch to activities such as commercial motorbike riding, street food vending, urban agriculture, sales at kiosks, among others) are still makeshift in nature and are largely constrained by livelihood assets. In this regard, there is a need for urban development stakeholders to undertake participatory urban development project design and implementation which will help the town regain its economic vibrancy, very much reminiscent of the crop export years.

Keywords: Livelihood Strategies, Assets, Declining Towns, Sub Saharan Africa, Nkongsamba

1. Introduction

1.1. Background

The process of physical, social and economic deterioration that confronts inner city and central neighborhoods has been a subject of discussion in urban geography for a very long time. Urban decline is viewed as a double process of demographic regression and economic fall that affects in a structural manner two constituted elements of a town - its population density and economic functions leading to a loss of urban vitality [18]. Contrary to urban growth, the notion of urban decline underlines the common loss of population,

employment, and of resources, which is expressed by a spatial depreciation (waste land and vacancies) but not necessarily by outward urban shrinkage.

Urban decline as a term first appeared at the end of the 1970s in the United States and in the 1980s in Germany to indicate a series of unwanted processes taking place in the big industrial towns of the Middle-West of the United States or in the Ruhr Westphalia District of Germany. As of the year 2000, the phenomenon spread to other parts of the world, particularly in Europe indicating the regressive dynamics that characterize towns of all sizes and of different specialized economies [6]. Despite this history, the concept of declining cities remains a very complex one because of the varied

factors that are related and responsible for it.

In Sub Sahara Africa just as in many parts of the world, the main factor responsible for urban decline is the fall in the necessary economic and industrial development which is the driving force behind social changes and infrastructural development [10]. This is manifested through a fall in personal income of the population, a fall in commercial activities, a reduction in the process of exchange of goods and services, a drop in skilled employment opportunities and an increase in unemployment and under-employment of the youthful population. These forces tend to trigger a corresponding drop in local revenue collection from the fallen buoyant economic activity, thus precipitating a fall in communal infrastructural development. Economic stagnation or decline apart from making towns less attractive also leads to urban poverty. The scarcity of financial resources and a decrease in public and private investments are important factors that contribute not only to the loss of urban vitality, but also to the deterioration of urban heritage. A characteristic feature in the loss of urban vitality is a change in the pattern of land occupation and land use coupled with a gradual devaluation of real estate properties and the impoverishment of the population [1]. A consequence of urban decline for most towns has been the loss of livelihoods for a majority of their inhabitants leading to shifts to other livelihood survival strategies. Governments have been interested in revitalizing urban areas through the institution of reforms and policies to support such urban environments. However, a crucial factor that needs to be looked upon rests largely on how governments could strengthen current livelihood support systems of urban residents.

Faced with such an unwanted situation of urban decline, urban dwellers generally resort to others life supporting activities within and outside the urban milieu to enable them deal with changing times and economic pressure and cope with the low levels of real incomes. Such alternative means of income creation have being term as livelihood coping or survival strategies. The informal economy has been a platform where several of these strategies are displayed. In fact, it is a vital source of income generation. The informal economy is one way of pointing to how people devised their own means of survival and sometimes of prosperity in the urban markets that spring up spontaneously to meet their needs [15].

The notion of 'livelihood survival strategies' refers to "the mix of individual and household strategies, developed over a given period of time that seeks to mobilize available resources and opportunities" [14]. Livelihood strategies comprise the range and combination of activities and choices that people make/undertake in order to achieve their livelihood goals. It should be understood as a dynamic process in which people combine activities to meet their various needs at different times. Different members of a household might live and work at different places, on a temporarily, semi-permanent or permanent basis [4]. Livelihood strategies are directly dependent on asset status and policies, institutions and processes for the achievement

of livelihood goals and outcomes. Livelihood outcomes are therefore the achievements or outputs of livelihood strategies, such as increased income, increased well-being, reduced vulnerability, improved food security and a more sustainable use of natural resources. When thinking about livelihood outcomes, the aim of a particular group as well as the extent to which these are already being achieved has to be fully understood. The concept of urban livelihood relates to the assets, capabilities and functions that sustain survival in urban environments.

The broad context within which urban dwellers in most countries in the South are seeking to secure their livelihoods and meet their basic needs is bleak. In most countries in Africa and Latin America, the scale and depth of urban poverty increased during the 1980s, as national economies stagnated ([28]; [17]; [26]). In Sub-Saharan Africa, this phenomenon took marks after the 1980s economic crises that affected most countries that had agriculture exportation of cash crop at the back of their economies. Countries like Botswana and Cameroon witnessed situations of urban decline which saw most of their urban centres and agrotowns decline and de-urbanize because of the fall in cash crop prices like coffee at the world market and a reduction in exportation of this cash crop. In Cameroon, such towns that were affected by the economic crisis and a fall in agricultural products include Nkongsamba and Bafang that served as centres of coffee production in the country. In the late 1960s, some years after the independence of Cameroon the town of Nkongsamba was among the most promising and developed towns in Cameroon and was even ranked the 3rd town in Cameroon following the 1970s town classification in Cameroon. With a population of more than 80,000 inhabitants, this urban centre had a buoyant and productive economy that favored and fostered socio-economic and infrastructural development including markets, roads, factories and schools. Following the economic crisis of the 1980s which greatly affected the agricultural sector worldwide, the town whose economic activities and development was at 80% based of coffee production, witnessed a fall in its economic activities. This in turn affected the whole development of the town. Faced with such a situation over the years, the population developed other livelihood survival strategies. In this paper, we sought to assess these livelihood survival strategies with a view of proposing strategies to strengthen them.

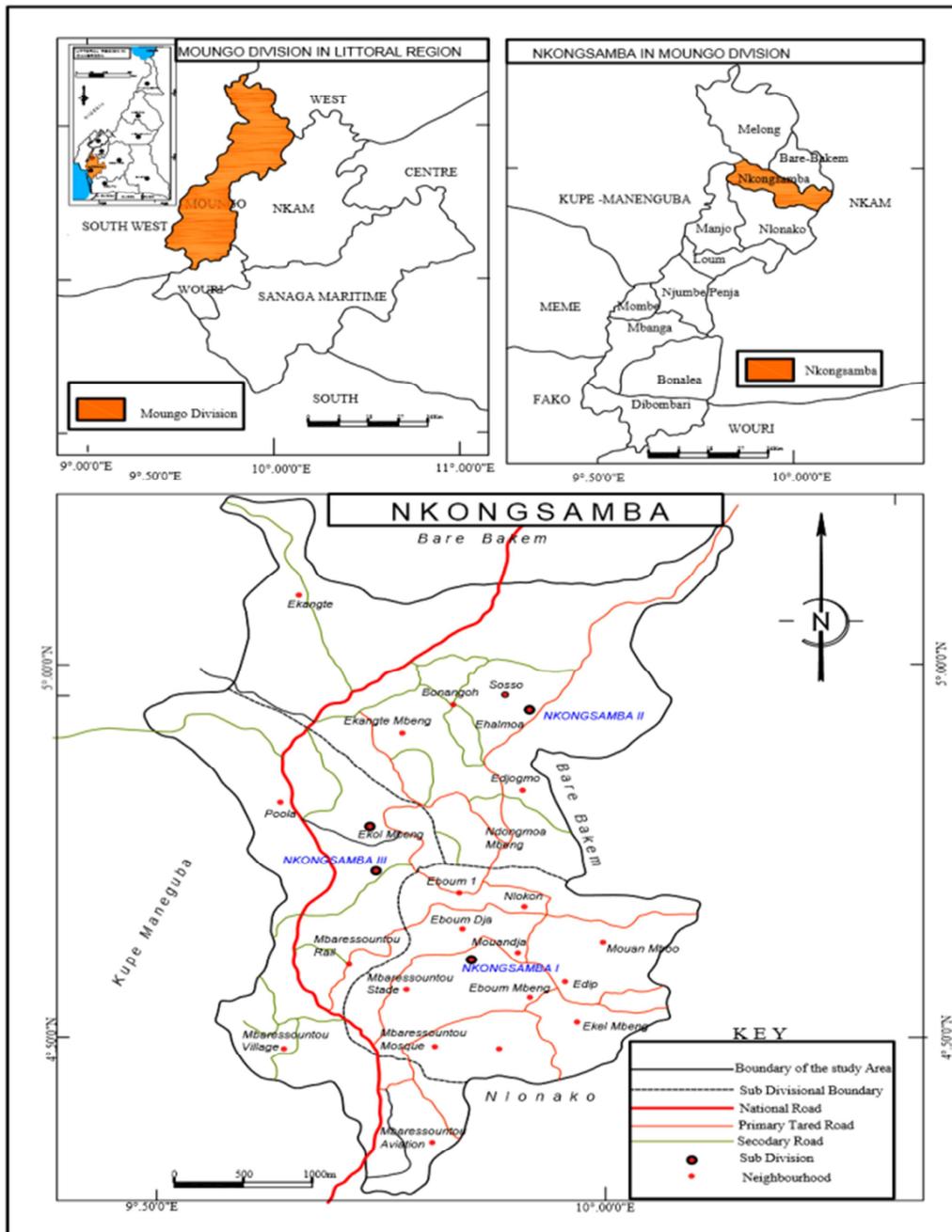
1.2. Statement of the Problem

The issue of urban decline which could be traced to American cities in the 1970s remains an unwanted phenomenon which calls for concerted efforts by urban stakeholders to address it. Ever since this unwanted phenomenon crept into the urban scene, scholars have largely focused on analyzing the processes leading to urban decline with a view of suggesting ways of revitalizing the urban environment. However, an important aspect which seemed to have eluded urban literature, or better still remains insufficient, concerns scientific perspectives on the livelihood

survival strategies employed by urban residents in the face of decline.

In view of such situation, much research has been carried out on the aspect of urban growth and development especially in Sub Sahara Africa in general (which registers the highest levels of urbanization of 45%) and in Cameroon in particular with an urbanization level of 56.1% in 2010 [27] to investigate and examine sustainable options to issues related to urban growth. Such studies mostly centred on urban growth strategies, urban development challenges, management and sustainability, urban decay and renewal. Although much research has been carried out on urban issues, most of these centred on the factors responsible, their

trajectories, consequences, renewal and revitalization strategies ([20]; [11]; [2]; [8]; [3]; [12]) but little has been done in terms of the surviving or coping strategies of urban dwellers in decline town. This is particularly true for the historic town of Nkongsamba which was hitherto ranked among the leading towns in Cameroon. The town witnessed significant decline in its vitality which is largely attributed to the decline in the crop export sector. As a result, the urban residents have developed livelihood survival strategies. The current study seeks to identify and categorize the different survival strategies of the urban dwellers of Nkongsamba. Furthermore, it seeks to assess these strategies with a view of proposing measures to strengthen them.



Source: Adapted from NIC Base Map 2015.

Figure 1. Location of study area.

2. Study Area and Research Methods

2.1. Study Area

Nkongsamba is found in Cameroon- Littoral Region- Moundou Division. It is located between latitude 4°54 and 5°10 North of the Equator and longitude 9°30 and 10°00 East of the Greenwich meridian.

Nkongsamba is situated along the Doula – Bafoussam highway; N5. It is bounded to the North by Bare Bakem and Melong, to the south by Ebone, Manjo, Loum and Njombe-Penja, to the east by Nlonako Subdivision and to the west by Bangem in Kupe-Manegouba Division. The city is made up of three councils; Nkongsamba I, Nkongsamba II and Nkongsamba III with a city council headed by a government delegate. The town has an estimated population of over 130,000 inhabitants (Nkongsamba City Council projections for 2012).

2.2. Research Methods

The study made use of a systematic sampling of 120 household heads which were drawn from 15 neighbourhoods of the Nkongsamba I, II and III councils. The target population involved informal sector participants who were judged to be the most affected in the urban decline situation. The informal sector population constitutes 70% which is thus estimated to be 30,000. The sampling strategy employed was systematic in which every 5th household within the targeted neighbourhoods were sampled. A semi-structured questionnaire was designed to capture issues of livelihood survival strategies, their effectiveness and measures to strengthen them. Furthermore, interviews were conducted with the Government Delegate of the Nkongsamba City council and the three mayors of Nkongsamba I, II and III councils. Through these interviews, data was collected from informants on their involvement, contributions and opinions on the study. Secondary data for this study involved population data from council reports and information relating to the evolution of informal sector activities including the motor bike sector. The Financial register of the Nkongsamba Buyam Sellam Association (NBSA) was consulted to determine the financial support provided to members in this social network in a bid to enhance their livelihood opportunities. Data for this study were analyzed using the descriptive statistical tools while a cartographic representation of the spatial distribution of livelihood activities was also employed. The content analysis was equally employed in which the views expressed by the respondents were reported.

3. Theoretical Underpinning and Literature Review

3.1. The Multiple Modes of Livelihood (MML) Theory

The Multiple Modes of Livelihood (MML) Theory captures the interplay between the formal and informal

economy. It provides a better understanding of the livelihoods of individuals and households engaged in both the formal and informal economy. The MML approach is a framework which captures the diversified means of raising extra income through the acquisition of additional jobs, not only on the part of the unemployed but also by those with fixed salaries [21]. The basic argument of the MML approach is that macro level economic changes across Africa have created a favourable environment for people of all social and economic background to diversify their sources of income. This has been largely due to the devastating effects of neoliberal economic reforms on the livelihoods strategies of various segments of the population including salaried employees. Also, the limited job creation potential of the private sector in urban Africa, coupled with retrenchment in the public sector reduced employment opportunities in the formal sector. Hence, the prevalent practice in several African cities is for people of different socio-economic backgrounds to rely on multiple sources of income to ensure their survival and resource accumulation. Consequently, the informal economy has become an avenue for ‘part-time’ employment for formal sector employees and a source of additional income for many with full-time employment in the formal sector. MML have become a way of life in several African cities, and therefore, the distinction between those who are employed in the formal and informal economy has become more blurry and complex. Its relevance is seen in the case of Nkongsamba since urban decline has affected those in the formal and informal sectors, although at varying degrees.

3.2. Literature Review

Much exist in the literature on issues of urban decline to include its causes, manifestations and implications. For instance, the causes and facets of urban decline have been attributed to a sharp decrease in economic activities caused by the departure of small businesses, petty industries and manufacturers, loss of economic and residential attractiveness. This departure leads to a remarkable decrease of urban vitality in inner city areas leading to further consequences such as changes in the pattern of land occupation and land use coupled with a gradual devaluation of real estate properties and the impoverishment of the population ([16]; [1]; [9]). The economic crisis provides a significant opportunity that compels societies to develop approaches which in the past were underutilized or not utilized called survival strategies [5]. As a consequence of urban decline, there is a change in the character and function of a determined neighborhood as well as the gradual shift in the profile of the inhabitants - caused by social mobility. Social decline processes manifest through poverty, vacancies, employment and social unrest. The social segregation and decline of the less privileged means their marginalization from the socio economic system, their spatial relegation to less valued and poorly managed zones, and the stigmatization of their habitant by the economic wealthy leads to social unrest ([16]; [10]).

In the face of urban decline, non-farm activities such as petty trading, street vending, local liquor production and small scale manufacturing constitute the main livelihood survival strategies of urban residents. Urban survival is based on the rural subsistence economy with a majority of the population getting involved in farming, and nearly all households cultivating food for their own consumption. Rural networks are used to provide food for their own consumption and for sale in the market. Schlyter (1990) distinguishes between two types of livelihood survival strategies: In an urban strategy, rural resources and contacts are exploited to enable a person stay in town, while a rural strategy is adopted by a person who accumulates resources with the aim of re-investing in a rural environment [24]. The bottom line is that urban decline precipitates entry into the informal sector involving mainly small-scale businesses characterized by ease of entry [11]. In some cases, the growths of civil society activities have been applied as a survival strategy. For instance, in Europe, civil society activities have centred on the need to improve housing and neighborhood development and discuss the actions, the problems and conflicts confronting the civil society and how they can be resolved [25].

Livelihood strategies for female headed households are determined by factors such as age, age at first marriage, household size, number of years of headship and marital and migration status are the most important demographic factors at work. However, access to financial, human, social, physical and natural capitals are considered as the leading determinants of livelihood strategies [19].

In analyzing the livelihood strategies of residents in the city of Bamenda – Cameroon, Ojong (2011) argues that the informal economy is not meant solely for the urban poor - middle income households also play a crucial role [22]. The informal sector activities permit the middle class to diversify their sources of income as well as accumulate capital. In another dimension, Geoff (2009) argues that a range of factors contribute to limited livelihood opportunities in rural areas especially but also in urban areas, including distance from markets, poor agro-ecology and sub-marginal land, low levels of public investment in service delivery and infrastructure, and conflict [13]. These constrain market development and hinder savings and private sector investment, which limit the potential for productivity gains, increases in real wages and expanded job opportunities.

4. Livelihood Survival Strategies in Nkongsamba

According to Ellis' (2000) classification, livelihood strategies can be divided into Natural resource based activities and Non-natural resource based activities [7].

4.1. Natural Resource Based Livelihood Strategies

This essentially looks at the aspect of rural – urban interrelations as a source survival for urban dwellers in

Nkongsamba. The urban poor rely on this strategy by making use of rural assets to safeguard their livelihoods in town. Such rural assets include agricultural lands (farms) and livestock, wherein access to these rural assets serve as supplementary, if not as essential element for securing and stabilizing the livelihood systems of many vulnerable urban households. Furthermore, urban agriculture serves as a livelihood survival strategy in Nkongsamba as 35% of the respondents practiced urban agriculture where they mostly cultivate vegetables and food crops.

4.2. Non-natural Resource Based Livelihood Strategies

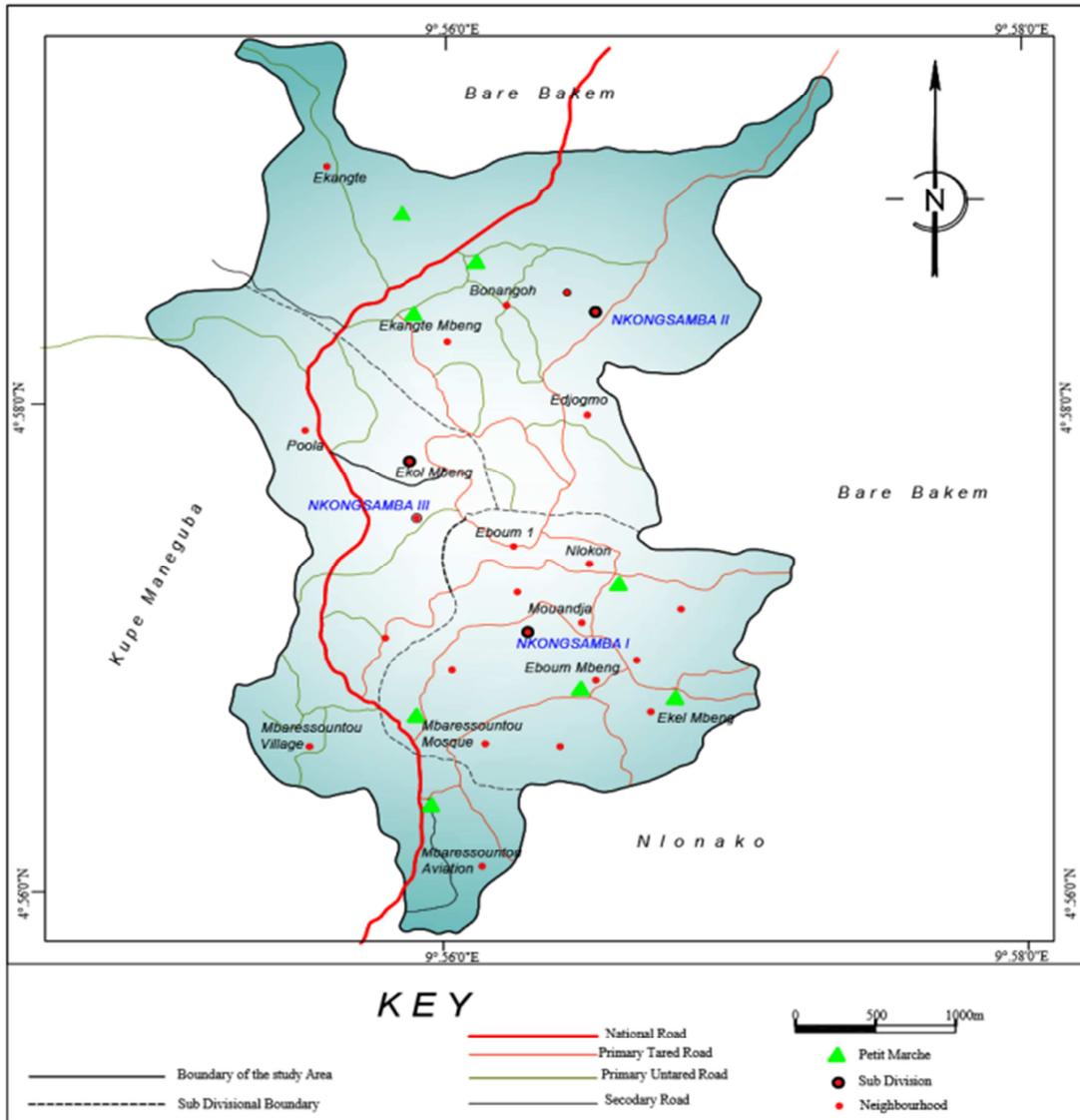
The motorbike taxis or commercial motorbikes activity in Nkongsamba is one of the many livelihood survival activities that developed in Nkongsamba in the face of the declining state of the town. This informal economic activity developed as a substitute activity to the declining coffee production activity which directly or indirectly employed more than half of the population of the town. It equally developed in response to lack of transportation means especially to the distant and interior neighborhoods and the poor transport facilities and road networks in Nkongsamba especially during the years after the coffee crises. Although it is largely dominated by the unemployed, in-service, retired civil servants and military persons still engage in this sector to secure complementary incomes. There are currently over 1500 commercial motorbikes in Nkongsamba. Nkongsamba registered an increase in the number of motorbikes from 100 in the year 2000 to 1650 in 2016 (Table 1). With over 1200 people involved in the activity and approximately 80,000 FCFA generated per week on average, the activity stands as one of livelihood survival strategies adopted by the population of Nkongsamba in the face of the urban decline.

Table 1. Evolution of motorbike Taxis in Nkongsamba (2000 to 2016).

Years	Number of motorbikes
2000	100
2002	250
2004	375
2006	480
2008	865
2010	1150
2012	1300
2014	1421
2016	1650

Source: Nkongsamba City Council Archives

The petty market initiative involves the introduction of unregulated and spontaneous markets which are organized by farmers mainly in the evenings to market urban agricultural products. These “petit Marché” as they are popularly called serves as survival strategy to some residents of Nkongsamba (Figure 2). They start at 4:00pm and last just for 2-3 hours. The items sold in these petty markets are mainly food stuff such as cassava, banana, plantains, maize, vegetables and fruits.



Adapted from NIC Base Map 2015.

Figure 2. Spatial distribution of “Petty markets” in Nkongsamba.

Another important non natural resource based survival strategy is street food vending. It involves the selling of a variety of cook food along the streets, especially around market places and the Commercial Avenue. This livelihood strategy is practiced mostly by women. The activity involves two categories; permanent resident street food vendors and mobile street food sellers. The first category of Permanent Street vendors have makeshift selling points situated along areas with a high concentration of potential customers such as around commercial motorbikes waiting points or parks. The mobile street food vendors move around the Central Business District and administrative zones at midday to provide door-to-door service. Highway vending and kiosks are important livelihood survival strategies employed. Highway vending involves the sales of food stuff; both cooked and raw and other local items along the Douala – Nkongsamba - Bafoussam Highway (Figure 3a). Sales are

done at Police or National Gendarmerie controls, toll gates and major road side junctions. In terms of income generated from the activity, urban residents earn average monthly incomes of 125.000 FCFA and 200.000 FCFA for the mobile and fixed street food vendors respectively, from which all other household, family and personal expenditures are catered for.



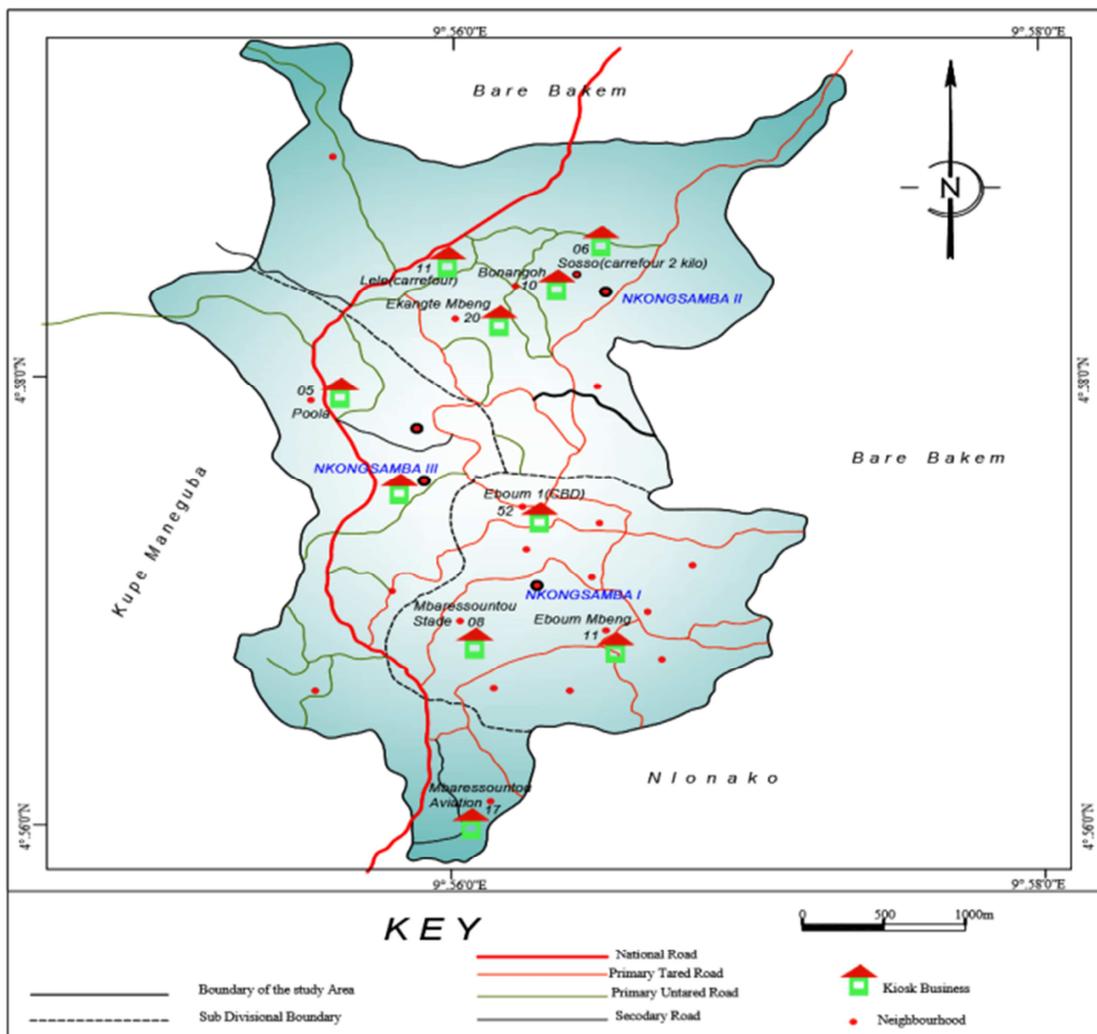


Source: Field work 2016

Figure 3. (a) Roadside vendors and 3 (b) Kiosks in Nkongsamba.

Unlike the previous livelihood strategy identified, kiosk business in Nkongsamba (Figure 3b) is recognized and regulated informal activity especially within the CBD, where

the municipality has organized sector and has a good number of kiosks established to which it receives rent and taxes for the occupation of public space. Elsewhere around the town, they kiosk are scattered around the major junctions and streets and are mostly private initiative. Kiosk business as a livelihood survival strategy has witnessed a tremendous growth in number and the type of items sold. From a few dotted kiosk around the CBD in the 1970s which concentrated on the sale of newspapers and lottery tickets, to more than to 500 kiosks today with more diverse items sold. In terms of income gain from the activity, a kiosk operator at the CBD has an average daily sale of 20.000 FCFA, wherein he has a profit of about 5.000 FCFA. This gives an average weekly 30.000 FCFA, and therefore a monthly income of averagely 120.000 FCFA. Figure 4 shows the spatial distribution of kiosks in Nkongsamba.



Source: Modified from NIC Base Map 2015

Figure 4. Spatial distribution of kiosks in Nkongsamba.

Other livelihood strategies include the provision of house rental services and urban social networking. House renting is mostly carried out by medium and high income earners who wish to secure and diversify their income earnings. Their current homes have been extended to

accommodate tenants. With the ever increasing population of Nkongsamba, this strategy stands as one of the most while employed by the medium and high income earners in nkongsamba since they can afford to buy plots and construct such houses.

Furthermore, urban social networking facilitates the economic and social integration of people within urban environments so that they could meet their many demands of daily life. They thus function as “shock absorbers” for the overall economic and social crises within urban milieu. Five types of urban social networks were identified in Nkongsamba; economic, cultural, religious, political and neighborhoods based urban networks, but the most important were the economic, cultural and neighborhood based urban networks. These networks are particularly important for information dissemination, facilitating collective action, exchange of material goods, services, skills and ideas that can be critical for diversifying incomes and livelihood survival. Most of the inhabitants are involved in more than one social network with the dormant ones being economic based (52%) and neighborhood based social networks (35%). For instance an urbanite maybe involved in economic (trade union), cultural (village associations) and their local neighborhood associations at the same time. On the field one of such association identified is the NBSA which consist of 55 registered members. Between 2014 to May 2016, a total of 24 cases of assistance were provided to members by the association to the tune of 2.820.000FCFA (Table 2).

Table 2. Assistance to members of the NBSA between 2000 -2016.

Years	Assistance	No. of cases	Amount per case in FCFA	Total amount in FCFA
2014	Deaths assistance	4	108.000	432.000
	Marriage assistance	3	108.000	324.000
	Illness assistance	3	54.000	162.000
	Project Financial assistance to members	2	200.000	400.000
Total		12		1.318.000
2015	Deaths assistance	3	108.000	324.000
	Marriage assistance	1	108.000	108.000
	Illness assistance	3	54.000	162.000
	Project assistance to members	2	200.000	400.000
Total		9		994.000
By march 2016	Deaths assistance	1	108.000	108.000
	Marriage assistance	0	108.000	0
	Illness assistance	0	54.000	0
	Project assistance to members	2	200.000	400.000
Total		3		2.820.000FCFA

Source: NBSA Financial Register (2016)

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

Urban decline is very much reminiscent in the town of Nkongsamba. This has, over the years led to the introduction of a series of livelihood support strategies in the face of such decline. These strategies are categorized into natural resource based (farming and animal husbandry) and non-natural resource based activities (commercial motorbike taxis, street food and roadside vending, spontaneous evening markets initiative and urban social networking). Diversification and intensification of livelihoods survival strategies among the residents is common wherein some people are involved in

more than one activity at a time. These livelihood strategies which are employed at different levels by both the formal and informal sector urban residents are considered to be fairly effective in terms of the outcomes and achievements of the different livelihood strategies. This is mirrored on the daily and monthly income gains from the activities and the social gains and individual transformation that contribute to improve on livelihoods. Increase in incomes, food security, educational opportunities, interpersonal and community support, and social recognition and respect were the outcomes and achievements from the various livelihood survival strategies. Despite these, livelihood activities are constrained by a series of factors to include low level of education, lack of technical skills, limited capital, poor infrastructure (roads and markets), mistrust and discrimination (in social networks), and limited access to land (in term of its scarcity and escalating price).

In this regard and as a way forward, the inhabitants of Nkongsamba should seek personal human development in terms of education and training especially in potential income generating fields and activities such agricultural practices and techniques which lead to higher outputs and increase in income levels. For instance, youths should be encouraged to enroll into Governmental livelihood enhancing programmes such as the Integrated Program for Support to Informal Sector Actors (PIAASI) and the Support Programme to Rural and Urban Youths (PAJER-U) which are programmes designed for the training and support of youth in their struggle for livelihood survival.

The councils should improve on communal infrastructures such as farm to market roads and market structures which are basic physical assets for livelihoods for both natural and non natural resource based activities. This will help strengthen the capacities of the population and facilitate the exchange of goods and services and the generation of income for better wellbeing. Market-based interventions such as low taxes can strengthen the livelihood strategies of highly vulnerable groups by empowering them to take advantage of a broader range of economic opportunities at their disposal. Furthermore, helping them identify alternative livelihood opportunities for productive work and training them to be able to access information about sales and marketing, helping them to establish strong linkages with markets at the local, regional and global levels to guarantee optimal livelihood outcomes in terms of income generated and well-being among others. The government should initiate and implement specific economic and infrastructural relieve programmes and plans for town like Nkongsamba that will help the town regain its economic vibrancy as in the 1970s during the coffee boom. Economic programmes such as the creation of new industries and factories in the town will help provide formal job and perennial incomes to the surviving population for better livelihoods. Lastly, government should encourage the existing social organizations in the communities, to be formally integrated into legal and functional of their activities with supervisory bodies and intuitions so that they can benefit from all related advantages and aids in terms of organizational skills, training and financial assistance for a better attainment of livelihoods.

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