



RURAL WOMEN IN THE FACE OF FOOD CRISIS IN MEZAM- NORTH WEST REGION OF CAMEROON

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ABSTRACT-----

Mutations in the rural areas of Mezam have made agricultural production very challenging and resulting in food crisis. The women who make up the majority of the farmers' population are faced with a lot of constrains which limits their potentials in production. The objective of this study is to examine the constrains faced by rural women in agricultural production in Mezam and the measures that can be put in place to redress the problem of food crisis.

The study made use of primary data through questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussions and field observations. A sample size of 2% was drawn from the 31474 households in the rural areas of Mezam to administer the questionnaires for the study. Findings revealed that only 8.6% of the rural women have access to farmland against 48.2% who have conditional access and 43.2% who do not have access to farmland at all. Secondly, only 14.7% of the rural women have access to capital for farming while 65.7% have limited capital and 19.6% have no capital for farming at all. Lastly, 58.6% of the women practice primitive farming systems which results in low outputs. However, 35% use modern farming methods and 6.4% practice advanced farming methods which are rather involved in the production of commercial crops at the expense of food crops which still results in food crisis. This confirms that the challenges faced by the rural women in production have greatly reduced yields and causing food crisis in Mezam. The suggestions advanced in this study will go a long way to empower the rural women in Mezam to have access to farmland, capital and modern farming technics for a greater productivity and food self sufficiency.

KEY WORDS: Rural Women, Access, Food Crisis, Empowerment -----

1.INTRODUCTION

Food crisis is an acute problem in the rural areas of Sub Saharan Africa and Mezam in particular. This has greatly increased the level of poverty in the communities. Women play a vital role in the development of agriculture as they make up more than 50% of the workforce and 70% of the staple food production (FAO, 2020). Despite the significant contribution, the potentials of women in production is not adequately recognised as they are often marginalised with limited access to farmland, capital and agricultural technics. The rural areas of Mezam suffer from food crises over the recent years. Famine is the order of the day and prices of agricultural products are persistently rising to attest to this. Many reasons are responsible for this food crisis especially the limited attention given to women in the agricultural sector. Farming activities by women requires quick access to farm land and off farm resources which is not usually the case.

The rules on management of land and its exploitation in rural Mezam are gender bias as the women who make up the greater proportion of the farmers' population have little access to farm land, capital and techniques of production. Villages of Mezam Division are patriarchal communities which do not give access to, or land ownership rights to women. Despite the enforcement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) on gender equality and women empowerment, many patriarchal communities in Sub Saharan Africa (SSA) and Cameroon are yet to adapt (Fonjong et al, 2010). Goal number three of the MDGs aim "To promote gender equality and empower women." Gender equality has clouded reforms path ways for women's access to land ownership and food security. Historical and traditional customs in Mezam Division keeps replicating, impacting gender access to land tenure rights and food security (Njoh, 2013).

World Bank (2019) argued that secure access and land rights for women contributes to the realization of fundamental human rights, improve food and nutritional security and reduce poverty in the rural areas. Gender parity oriented reforms are less robust and prone to producing ambivalent outcomes vis-a vis women's tenure challenge and aggravated food shortage in the rural areas of Sub Saharan Africa (Enchaw and Tchawa, 2019). Micro economics for women is gradually being perceived through the prism of precarious access to land, land security for women and food security for SSA (FAO, 2016). This is critical in SSA because the women feed the households and are the most affected by land grabbing and land titling which stifle food production and security.



This is the situation in rural Mezam Division where the women incarnate peculiar traits and therefore still feed the population despite statutory challenges of access to land and tenure security. In the rural areas of Mezam, the war against patriarchy as women's interest on land is more politicized today and contested. While the slogan on gender equity is preached, women still have obstacles to own land or lack the full right to private property. Women face patriarchal customs in the rural areas of the North west region and Mezam in particular that categorizes them as "property" and so, a property cannot own property (Njoh, 2010). Customary laws do not recognize women's property ownership and so, do not have the tenure security in the rural areas of Mezam which greatly reduces agricultural production.

The rural areas of Bafut, Bambui, Bambili, Mankon, Bali, Nkwen, Bamendakwe, Pynyin and Awing which make up over 90% of the Mezam rural have unique customary laws on women's land ownership rights. (Interview with fon Abumbi 11 of Bafut on the customs managing traditional land, August 3, 2022). These rural areas of Mezam are typically patrilineal communities where the women have limited access to land. In these rural communities, the lineage head is the Fon or chief who is assisted by the sub chiefs (Atangcho) and the quarter heads (*Tanikuru*) at the smallest community level. They make up the traditional council or the village regulatory council commonly called "*kwifor*". The women's regulatory body is headed by the Fon's mother commonly called "*Ma'afor*" and assisted by the women's quarter heads called "*Ma'anikuru*." The women's regulatory wing which function under the stewardship of the "*kwifor*" has no independent right over rural land issues.

The traditional council wield a lot of influence over land and constitute the guarantors of tenure security at the community level in rural Mezam Division. The fon, sub-chiefs and the quarter heads remain the custodians of land in the villages and acknowledges the right of a lineage head or individuals over a piece of land. In the Bafut community for instance, the right to land ownership is acknowledged after the man must have given food and drinks and feeding the community (The items for this traditional formality are a healthy pig, 2 goats, 10 fowls, 10 healthy bunch of plantains, 10 crates of drinks, 5 jugs of palm wine, 3 baskets of Achu, a bag of cola nuts and a fabric) and if the land is over 5 hectares and more, money will be charged in addition. The individual or the lineage head at this level has the defacto tenurial rights and only the fon can take over the land (Interview with the head of the traditional Council in Bafut, August 3th 2022). This greatly limits access to land especially to women in the rural areas of Mezam which affects agricultural production in many ways. Some custodian asserts that empowering the female child is a lost while others see it as an indirect way of empowering the family of the husband. This greatly frustrates the female children and leaving negative effects on agricultural production in the rural areas of Mezam Division.

Husbands reserve the rights to provide farmland to their wives as the first asset after marriage. This implies that, the husband's share of the family land is given to the wife for cultivation only. The men as head of the family can do anything on the land without the permission from their wives. In most of these farms observed by the researcher, the women carry out farming on the land while the husband exploit other resources on the land like palms for tapping, harvesting of trees for fuel wood and so on.

Girl children rarely inherit from their fathers but when married and needs land for cultivation, the father can provide but with the main purpose to cultivate for food that can feed the family. All the gender parity practices limits women's access to land which makes them unable to cultivate in commercial quantities. Agricultural production in these rural areas of Mezam is low, given that the men who have the usufructuary rights over the rural land are not fully involved in farming activities while the women who make up a greater proportion of the farmer's population rather have limited access to farmlands. It is on these basis that Shiva (2016) in his study examined who really meets up with the food security challenges in the World.

In some of the patriarchal rural areas of Mezam Division, widows even loose legal protection and their prime positions over late husband's properties. The customary laws in these rural areas of Mezam are totally against women's efforts to promote agriculture and therefore impacting production negatively. Following a focus group discussion with the Veghing women farming common initiative group of Nkwen (December, 2021) on the accessibility of farmland to the women's group, the researcher gathered that the traditional land management laws are a major hindrance to their farming projects. They express the challenges faced to acquire and exploit farmland through their husbands and quarter heads which contributes in low productivity of the group.

2.CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

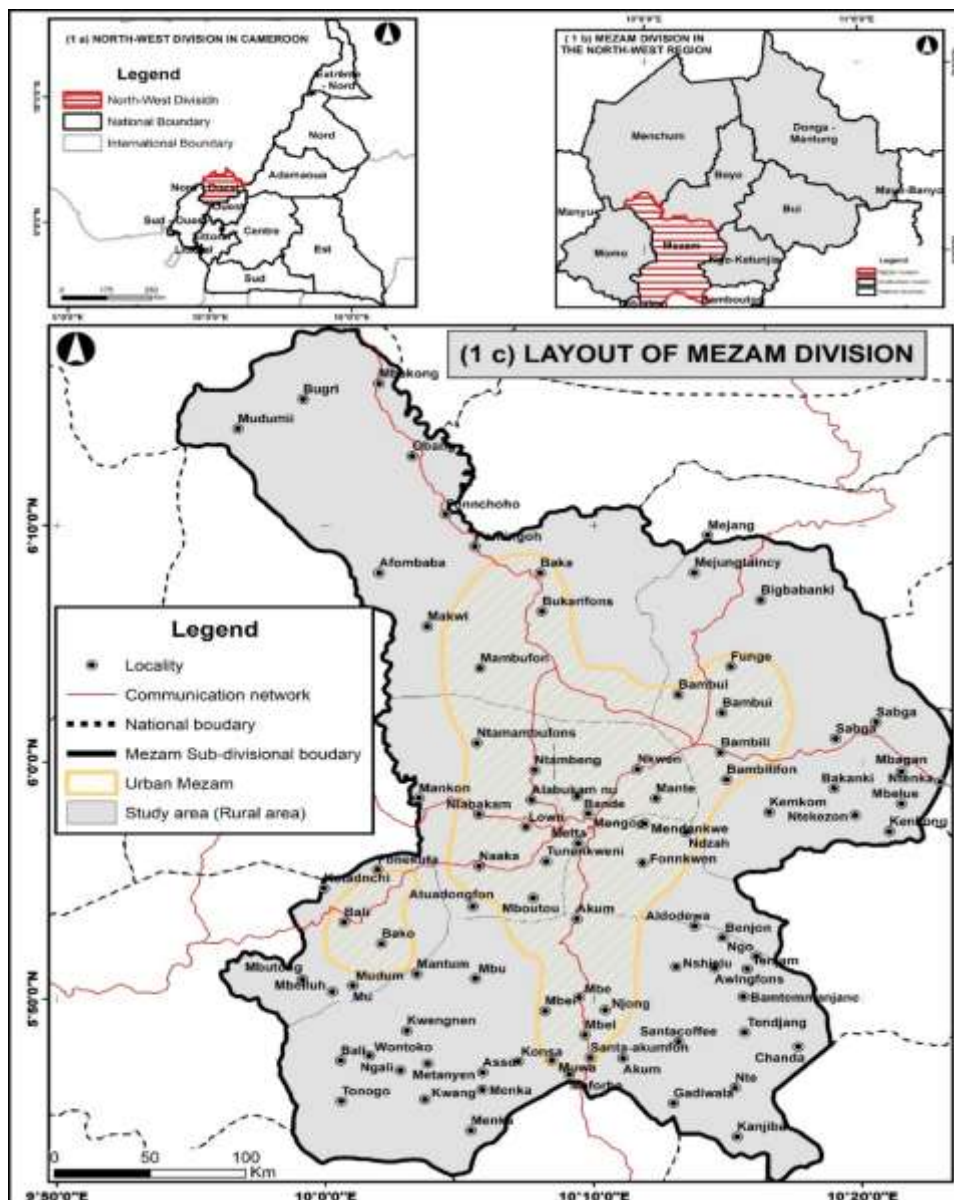
The concepts of gender discrimination and gender equity are used to explained the causal framework in this study. Gender discrimination denotes that there are unequal rights and priviledges between men and women in these rural areas which affects agricultural production. The traditions and customs of these rural communities regard women as 'properties' and should not have the right to ownership. A majority of these women therefore do not

have access to farmland, no access to finance, and even lack the technical knowledge on farming due to little education given. This results in the little inputs from women in the agricultural sector and consequently declining yields.

The concept of gender equity illustrates a community where the exploitation of resources is gender biased and not generally productive. Ensuring gender equity in these rural areas will permit men and women to work in collaboration in order to improve on agricultural production. The agricultural potentials will easily be managed especially by the women who make up the majority of the farmers population in the rural areas of Mezam.

3. STUDY AREA

The study focuses on the rural areas of Mezam Division in the North West Region of Cameroon where agriculture is a prime activity. Mezam is one of the seven divisions of the North West Region of Cameroon which was created in 1972. The Division lies between longitude 9°07' and 10°21' east of the Greenwich meridian and between latitude 5° 20' and 6°15' North of the equator. It has a surface area of about 1841km² and a population of 524127 inhabitants (BUCREP, 2005). With a growth rate of 2.6%, the population is estimated at 755786 inhabitants by 2023. Mezam Division has seven Sub divisions which are Bamenda I, Bamenda II and Bamenda III, Bafut, Bali, Santa and Tubah. The rural landscape in the seven Sub division makes up the matrix in this study (figure 1).



Source: Generated from Geo database of Cameroon, 2013, NIS Yaounde
Figure 1: Location of the study area



4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The data for this study was obtained from secondary and primary sources. Secondary source data included diversified literature from international Scientific Journals , Agricultural production reports from MINADER, MIDENO, ACEFA and NGOs engaged in the promotion of agriculture. They gave an appraisal of the challenges faced by women in agricultural production. BUCREP gave the data on the population and households in rural mezam. The farmers groups both women and mixed, working under the support and supervision of MIDENO and ACEFA provided data on the trends of agricultural yields and the challenges faced by women in production.

The primary data were collected using questionnaires, interviews, focus group discussion and field observations. Using a 2% sample size from 31474 households in rural MeZam, 630 questionnaires were taken to the field with 600 effectively administered. The systematic random sampling technic was used where a copy of questionnaire was administered for every 50 households. The questions were both open and close end, and also administered to both women and men who were versed with agricultural activities. This allowed the respondents to freely express their opinions about gender and production possibilities. Structured and semi structured interviews were conducted with the heads of agricultural stakeholders and traditional authorities to appreciate the challenges facing the rural women in food production. Four focus group discussions were conducted with each from Bafut sub division, Bali , Santa and Tubah where a greater proportion of the population is engaged in agriculture. Two of these groups were entirely made up of women and two were mixed, giving room for both gender to appreciate the degree of gender discrimination and how it affects agricultural production and causing food crisis in MeZam.

5. RESULTS

Findings revealed that the rural women in MeZam division are exposed to a lot of challenges in agricultural production which greatly contributes in food crisis. Given that the women makes up more than 50% of the agricultural workforce, limited inputs from them will significantly reduce yields.

5.1 Rural women and access to farmland

In the patriachial communities of rural MeZam, a majority of women do not have access to farmland while others who cultivate are based on negotiations and compensations. Results indicate that, only 8.6% of the women have access to farmland and 48.2% of them have conditional access while 43.2% do not have access to farm land at all which results in the food crises experienced in MeZam (table 1)

Table 1: Rural Women In MeZam And Access To Farmland

Sub Division	Effective Respondents	Access to farmland		
		Access to farmland	Conditional access to farmland	No access to farmland
Bafut	151	13	72	66
Bali	39	4	19	16
Bamenda1	28	3	14	11
Bamenda2	17	2	8	7
Bamenda3	55	5	27	23
Santa	212	17	102	93
Tubah	98	8	47	43
TOTAL	600	52	289	259
percentage		8.6	48.2	43.2

Source: Field work, July 2022

Table 1 confirms that 91.4% of the rural women in MeZam do not have full access to farmland which reduces agricultural production. The 8.6% of these women who have full access to cultivable land cannot meet up with the food demands of the population of MeZam and consequently food crisis.

5.2 Rural women and limited financial base for agricultural production

Capital is a major input in agricultural production and where it is unreliable, yields are often affected. Most women in rural MeZam do not have sufficient capital to invest in agricultural production. Results show that only 14.7% of the women have access to capital for effective production while 65.7% have limited capital which cannot support effective production. On the other hand, 19.6% do not have access to capital at all which limits agricultural production and resulting in food crisis in the rural areas of MeZam (table 2).



Table 2: Rural Women In Mezam And Access To Capital

Sub Division	Effective Respondents	Access to capital		
		Access to sufficient capital	Inadequade capital	No access to capital
Bafut	151	23	99	29
Bali	39	6	26	7
Bamenda1	28	4	18	6
Bamenda2	17	2	11	4
Bamenda3	55	8	36	11
Santa	212	31	140	41
Tubah	98	14	64	20
TOTAL	600	88	394	118
Percentage		14.7	65.7	19.6

Source: Field work, July 2022

Table 2 confirms that 85.3% of the women in Mezam lack full access to capital for agricultural production which greatly results in the food crisis. Only 14.7% of these women have access to sufficient capital for production which cannot meet up with food self sufficiency in Mezam.

5.3 Rural women in Mezam and farming techniques.

The techniques in agricultural production are very important for the realisation of outputs. These techniques are often acquired through training workshops and sensitisation campaigns to the farmers. Results show that 59% of the rural women use primitive farming practices like bush following , the ‘ankara’ system, open ranch amongst others which results in low yields and food crisis. Also, 35% of the women practice modern farming systems while 6% carry out advance agricultural techniques in line with second generation agriculture (table 3).

Table 3: Rural Women In Mezam And Farming Techniques

Sub Division	Effective Respondents	Farming Techniques		
		Primitive farming techniques	Modern farming techniques	Advanced farming techniques
Bafut	151	89	53	9
Bali	39	23	14	2
Bamenda1	28	16	10	2
Bamenda2	17	10	6	1
Bamenda3	55	32	19	4
Santa	212	125	74	13
Tubah	98	57	34	7
TOTAL	600	352	210	38
Percentage		58.6	35	6.4

Source: Field work, July 2022

Table 3 revealed that 58.6% of the rural women in Mezam practice primitive farming systems which are largely subsistence. The rest (41.4%) who practice modern farming techniques are more tilted towards the cultivation of commercial crops which do not meet up with the food needs of the population.

In the rural communities of Mezam, many reasons were raised to account for the food crisis experienced ranging from social, economic and environmental. This is aggravated by the complex and costly procedures of land acquisition with the state which give room for government officials and traditional authorities to manipulate in their favor, against agricultural production. The study proceeded to find out the perception of the respondents on the major causes of food crisis in rural Mezam (table 4).

Table 4: Causes Of Food Crisis In The Rural Areas Of Mezam

Sub Division	Effective Respondents	Challenges to agricultural production in rural Mezam				
		Tradition	State rules	Access to capital	Poor farming techniques	Gender barrier
Bafut	151	46	13	19	34	39
Bali	39	16	1	3	4	15
Bamenda1	28	10	1	4	5	8
Bamenda2	17	4	6	3	3	1
Bamenda3	55	19	6	3	5	22
Santa	212	53	48	31	22	58



Tubah	98	26	20	14	14	24
TOTAL	600	174	95	77	87	167
Percentage		29	15.8	12.8	14.5	27.9

Source: Field work, July 2022

Table 4 reveals the perception of the respondents on the causes of food crisis in rural Mezam. The major challenge affirmed by 29% of the respondents is the tradition. These rural areas stick to traditions which conserve community land for families, shrines and respect the land tenure practices which all limit farmers' access to farmland. Another serious challenge posed by 27.9% of the respondents is gender barrier where women are not allowed to own land. This is because, the tradition relegates the women as a 'property' which is ultimately handed over to a man from another family. This is a major challenge due to the fact that the women who make up the farmers' population in Mezam do not have access to farm land. The state is another challenge according to 15.8% of the respondents. This is because the procedures to acquire land certificate is made complicated by the administrative bottle necks which limit access to farmland and reducing agricultural production in the rural areas of Mezam. Over 14.5% of the respondents' attribute food crisis to poor farming techniques which produces for subsistence. Limited access to capital is another cause of food crisis as confirmed by 12.8% of the women in Mezam. All these challenges contribute in low agricultural production in rural Mezam and this view was confirmed by the Director of technical services at MIDENO in an interview (19/08/2022) on the challenges faced by farmers in the rural areas of Mezam and the agricultural production report from the delegation of MINADER (table 5).

Table 5: Agricultural production with improved seeds in Mezam Division from 2019 – 2021

Crop type	Improved seeds distributed/surface area cultivated						Production (in tons)			
	2019	Area	2020	Area	2021	Area	2019	2020	2021	Observation
Beans	350	8.75	15600	156	41670	254.8	17.5	750.5	577.4s	Fall in production
Maize	233	17150	304	17575	75	3750	19619	20105	9375	Fall in production
Onion	8.5	17	8.5	17	215	5.5	255	255	40.5	Fall in production
Water melon	1.2	1.6	15221.1	4.6	8705.6	7.5	90	150	876	increase in production
Tomatoes	4.9	9.3	7.3	24.5	11141	12.5	100.2	462.5	1101.5	Increase in production
Yams	109520	110.5	609418	4679	2401000	36.2	1615	2897.5	1320.5	Fall in production
Macabo (pomlets)	150	150	747550	7624	1760500	52.0	2250	13461	1415	Fall in production
Irish potatoes	11217	92.6	12139	113.6	616401	62.5	1389	1569	3343.5	increase in production
Sweet potatoes (vines)	300,000	8.5	325000	632.5	341500	9.4	127.5	9487.5	238.8	Fall in production
Cassava (cutting)	4110150	556.8	4815447	624.05	3559000	72.0	6183	8775.75	7523	Fall in production
Oil palms	1287	9	6358	65	9275	4.0	12000	55700	61200	increase in production
Cocoa	47600	27.5	48575	123.5	271401	3.0	18	117	541	Increase in production
Arabica coffee	6315	25.25	12107.5	51	145,500	5.0	24.25	54.3	74.8	Increased production
Robusta coffee	50400	25.7	53580	32	10,000	-	25.5	32.5	38	increase in production

Source: Annual report of MIDENO through MINADER, 2021

Table 5 reveals the agricultural outputs in rural Mezam from 2019 to 2021. Generally, food crop production has dropped over these years and this is affirmed by the rising prices for farm produce in the various markets in Mezam division. This is greatly due to the fact that the women who are mostly engaged in their cultivation have limited access to farmland, limited capital and technics for production. The male farmers are mostly involved in the production of the commercial crops and with all the potentials at their disposal, yields are improved.



6.DISCUSSION

The result on access to farmland by the rural women in Mezam indicates that only 8% have access to farmland. These are women found in the rural areas where land markets are open for purchase like in Santa, Bali and Bambui amongst others. Here, individuals and farming groups have bought land from traditional authorities or family heads which is freely exploited for agricultural production. On the other hand, 48% of farmers who have conditional access are those who are exploiting farmland on least hold basis, fee tail, share cropping, tutorat and collective land ownership. The women in this case do not freely exploit and benefit from the farming activity because it involves financial or material compensation to the rightful owners. The lack of full ownership rights restrict the extend of land intended to exploit as well as the outputs. This view is in line with Njoh (2013) in his studies on the accessibility and equity of farmland to farmers in the North West Region of Cameroon.

The women in this case also have a given time agreed for the land to be exploited after which the rightful owners take over. The 44% of women who do not have access to farmland are those found in areas where customs are rigid and families with expanse of land hold to it without compromising on any conditions for non family members to exploit. This view is supported by Enchaw and Tchawa (2020) in their works on agricultural production in areas of land tenure reforms in sub saharan Africa. This therefore shows that restricted access to farmland remains a major challenge to agricultural production in sub saharan Africa and especially in rural Mezam. In some cases, widows loss their late husbands land owner rights or the family does not permit them to exploit again. In another dimension, women are no longer allowed to exploit family after being given out in marriage. Most women without farmland resort to be hired as labour in others' farms or are engaged in non agricultural activities like trade, hair dressing, and so on.

The result on access to capital reveals that only 14.7% of the rural women in Mezam have access to capital for effective agricultural production. These are those who rely on the support of NGOs and cooperative societies for reliable capital through loans, subventions and grants. With this capital, farm inputs like seeds, chemicals and farm tools are purchased to improve on yields. On the other hand, 65.7% of the women have limited capital for farming. The ADB (2010) in the strategic vision for development of Africa in the 'High 5' brings out limited capital as a major challenge to agricultural production which is the backbone of most economies. Most women often reserve their little income through their husbands which is probably used for family projects. Also, these women do not belong to cooperative societies through which they can benefit from financial assistance, nor do they have collaterals which can permit them get loans. This limits their ability to produce at full capacity and hence, low yields and food crisis. The 19.6% of the rural women with access to capital are the poor farmers most of whom are old and some are widows who are unable to raise capital for farming or are un able to request for financial assistance. This assertion is confirmed by Dorothy (2015) in her study on the Rural women accessibility to resources for food production in the North West Region . The challenge of limited capital is not only with the women of rural Mezam but for the North west region as a whole. With this constrain, they mostly practice subsistence farming to support the family and consequently low agricultural yields in the rural areas of Mezam.

With respect to the result on rural women and farm technics adopted, 58.6% who practice primitive farming technics are not educated and have not had access to training programs that can improve their production capacity. They are therefore conservative and stick to the traditional systems inherited over generations, and practicing subsistence agricultural systems which results in low yields. Even with the present challenges on agricultural production, they are not still exposed to agricultural workshops organised by the agric staff through which their knowledge can be improved due to ignorance or limited means to pay for participation fee. Abireche (2022) in his evaluation on the agricultural production and challenges in Mezam strongly confirmed that the poor technical inputs of the rural women is a major handicap. It is on these basis that ACEFA (2022)in the evaluation of the technical production units outline empowerment in form of technical training to the rural women as a necessity for agricultural improvement in Mezam. The 35% of the rural women using modern technics are mostly school drop outs who are enlightened and are attached to agricultural NGOs , and farmers cooperatives where they benefit from training programs and sensitisation campaigns on modern agricultural technics. The 6.4% who practice advanced agricultural technics are mainly agric business men who have invested in the rural areas of Mezam in commercial farming systems like market gardening and the cultivation of irish potatoes. The outputs from these farms are mostly sold out of Mezam and leaving the rural areas without food which results in food crises.

7.CONCLUSION

The rural areas of Mezam suffers from food crisis which have accelerated the level of poverty in these communities. Based on the results from the study, the limited access to farmland for women as well as the limited access to capital and technics have largely contributed to the food crises given that the women make up more than 50% of the rural farmers in Mezam. These rural women however lack the possibilities to effectively exploit the agricultural potentials available in the rural communities of Mezam. Some parcels of land are seen unexploited



whereas many women lack farmland for exploitation. Most women with limited capital can only benefit from Njangi groups which is not only difficult but also very small to permit meaningful agricultural investments. The primitive agricultural practices by the rural women on the other hand also limits production. Given the importance of agriculture in these rural communities, some recommendations are given in this study in order to handle the challenges face by the rural women in production which will go a long way to reduce food crises and improve on the standards of living.

8.RECCOMENDATIONS

The efforts by the government to emancipate women from traditional constrains will greatly contribute to provide them with greater access to agricultural resources. Government policies through MINADER in consultation with traditional authorities will reduce the rigid land tenure practices which will give women the access to farmland for exploitation. In addition, development stakeholders in the rural areas of Mezam should adopt an integrated development approach where the women, youths and men sit on the same platform to deliberate on production challenges possibilities of improvements. This effort will however improve on agricultural production which solve the problem of food crisis and improve on the standards of living in Mezam.

In order to gain access to capital for farming, the rural women are advised to form cooperative societies which can easily enjoy financial benefit from development stakeholders. Also, the agricultural finance programs through ACEFA, MIDENO and other NGOs should easily target the rural women who are vulnerable to provide the capital needed for agriculture. Elite from Mezam are also called upon to assist these rural women especially the widows financially and materially. This will build the financial autonomy in the rural women who can eventually plough back for greater production to solve the problem of food crisis.

The organisation of free training programs for the rural women in particular by MIDENO and the other agricultural stakeholders in Mezam will go a long way to build their technical capacity for greater production. Through these capacity building programs, the rural women will learn modern farming technics which deals with improved seeds, diversification for greater production, processing of products as well as marketing. This will empower the rural women in Mezam to improve on production for commercial purposes and solving the problem of food crisis.

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