

**ASSOCIATION POUR LA PRESERVATION DE  
L'ENVIRONNEMENT ET LE PROGRES SOCIAL  
(ASSOCIATION FOR THE PRESERVATION OF THE  
ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL PROGRESS)**

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**STUDY OF THE ORGANISATION AND FUNCTIONING OF A  
DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION:  
THE CASE OF SARKAN ZOUMOUNTSI IN YAOUNDE,  
CAMEROON**

# **I - GENERAL PRESENTATION**

## **1. Socio-political context**

Until the 1990s, Cameroon was a socially very stable country, national unity had been achieved and social peace was a reality. Various subsidies and benefits were granted by the State to different sectors of national life: cases in point were education, higher education, research, health, agriculture.....But with the coming of the combined phenomena of democracy and the economic crisis, with their inevitable consequences for social stability, from one day to another everything was radically changed.

Indeed, with the double devaluation of salaries, the reduction of the personnel of the State, systematic savings on all benefits, subsidies and scholarships formerly granted by the State, and the resurgence of debates and wars of a tribal nature, Cameroonian citizens in general find themselves in quite the opposite situation from what they might hope for from a well organised society.

It is thus that the loss of schooling, the new upsurge in the incidence of illness and death, the organised crime, the wide-spread corruption of practices and attitudes all have their source in the lack of well-being of the citizens of Cameroon.

It was in the face of this problem of anti-social behaviour, linked, as we have emphasised above, to the phenomena of the economic crisis and poverty, that the movement Sarkan Zoumoutsi came into being.

To be precise, the Association was born in Yaoundé in 1995 - a “Chain of Solidarity” as its name, Sarkan Zoumoutsi, means in the Haoussa language. It is an a-political, non-profit association with its head office in Yaoundé, though it is represented in other Cameroonian towns, such as Douala for example.

## **2- The objectives of Sarkan Zoumoutsi**

At the founding of the Association, on the one hand the main objectives aimed at were:

- To fight against poverty and loss of schooling
- To improve the standard of teaching of the underprivileged sectors of the population
- To provide a tolerable setting for people to live in by protecting the environment
- To take care of orphans and abandoned children;
- And above all to promote the ideals of peace, tolerance and respect for differences.

On the other hand, Sarkan Zoumoutsi's mission was to promote development in the socially underprivileged sectors of the population. Seen from this perspective, the first priority lay in the resolution of the crucial problem of unemployment among young people. After that, it was necessary to create and encourage some income-generating activities for housewives and girls who had missed out on school, because these represent the most underprivileged sector of all our target groups.

## **3- Our Association's target groups**

The principle target groups for whose benefit we are carrying out our actions are first youth, then housewives and girls who have suffered from early marriages or loss of schooling. However, in another sense, we can say that our target group is the whole population in so far as actions to change behaviour in a society are a matter for each and every person. In this case we do not limit ourselves only to the target groups cited above.

Nevertheless, we can clearly state that the social characteristics of those who benefit from our actions are: poverty, violence, unemployment, lack of sanitation and departure from religious and social rules.

#### **4- The Founders of the Movement Sarkan Zoumountsi**

The idea of setting up a chain of solidarity in favour of our brothers and sisters in distress arose among a group of people from different social sectors and different religious confessions but who all had the same vision of the meaning of development and well-being of human beings.

Indeed we can name among the founding members: Salissou Mohama, Mériga Issa, Mahama Salissou Ibrahim, Malam Ibrahim (Imam in the town of Yaoundé), Sheik Ismaïla Awal (mam and Religious Affairs Counsellor in the town of Yaoundé), Mohaman Sani, Ndongo François, Mouhamadou Sani and Ibrahim Thomas.

The presence in the group of founders of people of different religious confessions proves how often the limits of our movement are difficult to fulfil. Today the following people have taken on the direction of the movement:

- Ibrahim Mahama Salissou: General Co-ordinator
- Mohaman Rabiou: Deputy Co-ordinator
- Abas Ousman: Secretary General
- Haman: Deputy Secretary General :
- Mouamadou Sany: General Treasurer
- Ibrahim Thomas: Commissioner of Accounts

With them are six Counsellors made up of Ulemas (scholars), Imams and local leaders.

Although the head office of our Association is in Yaoundé, actions in favour of our target groups are not limited to this one town. Our activities extend to several other places where we either have local branches or carry out periodic programmes.

#### **5- Resources and Means for Sarkan Zoumountsi's Action**

In order to carry out our work successfully on the ground, we have collected material and financial resources in our movement so that we can unite our ideas and our actions in practice.

##### **a) Moral resources**

The moral resources which our Association has in abundance are the Imams (Muslim religious leaders) and religious Counsellors who master the legal codes and theology of Islam. Their actions allow us to function according to the code of life in Islam.

These resource people act by preaching Islam. It is a matter of making the whole population in general and in particular our target groups aware of the validity of spiritual development by emphasising that human beings are not only present in the world through their bodies but also through their spirit. We raise here the problem of mutual aid among the brothers and sisters of a society and in this sense Allah (the Merciful) says in the holy Qur'an Chapter II, Verse 177: "Righteousness does not consist in whether you face the East or the West. The righteous man is he who believes in God, in the Last Day, in the angels and the Book and the prophets; who, though he loves it dearly, gives away his wealth to kinsfolk, to orphans, to the destitute, to the traveller in need and to beggars, and for the redemption of captives; who attends to his prayers and renders the alms levy; who is true to his promises and steadfast in trial and adversity and in times of war. Such are the true believers! Such are the God-fearing!"

Moreover a Hadith of the Prophet Mouhamad (Peace and Blessing of Allah be upon him) tells us that: "In the communion of their mutual affection, believers are like the limbs of the same body. If a single one suffers, it is the whole organism which falls prey to sickness and fever".

So this is where our movement draws its spiritual resources from: the well-being of all.

## b) Financial and Material Resources

The financial resources of our chain of solidarity come from:

- The contributions of its members
- Cultural activities (within the Association there is a group which produces theatrical plays and games)
- A grant from the European Union through the “Ant” Programme which looks for a participative and contributive approach by the people.
- A grant from the Islamic Development Bank which has financed the women’s Micro-projects.

## c) Means of Action

To complete our mission and achieve our objectives, we use the following means:

- Awareness-raising through posters, educational talks, debating conferences, seminars and sermons.
- We contribute to the creation or improvement of sanitary, social, cultural and scholastic infrastructure.
- We organise socio-cultural events.

## II – ANALYSIS OF SARKAN ZOUMOUNTSI’S PRACTICE

To-day, in our so-called “developing” country the notion of development and of social well-being is always assessed on the basis of the quantity of material wealth that this country is able to accumulate, independently of how it is that one has been able to accumulate this fortune. This implies that development really means exclusively to concentrate on the importance of economic growth, the rest can come afterwards. But is this the true sense of human development?

We find ourselves here in a capitalist system where the only thing which counts is immediate material profit.

In such a context, the aim of our association is certainly to seek development, the well-being of individuals in society, but not at any price, for in Sarkan Zoumountsi we take action following the great guide, Islam in general.

Concretely, our association holds monthly meetings with all its leading members. Here it is a matter of making enquiries in order to look into and bear in mind the problems which the association judges to be relevant in society and which eventually it categorises in order of priority.

Following these meetings, seminar-workshops are organised which are held with the sectors of the population concerned in order to establish a plan of action.

### 1 - Some of Sarkan Zoumountsi’s achievements

According to Sheik Ismaïla, Imam at the Central Mosque of Yaoundé, and in first verse of the Holy Q’uran, it is said: “Allah is Merciful and Lenient” he is Merciful on the day of the Resurrection and Lenient here below; he makes no distinction between the Muslim and the Christian, the Pagan and the Animist, and he enriches whom he will and impoverishes whom he will. Allah has authorised the co-habitation of different communities, lawful trade among them and respect for difference.

Still according to Sheik Ismaïla, each piece of work which we can carry out in favour of human beings will not be in vain. A reward awaits us in paradise.

Thus it is, as we said in the first part of our Study and in the light of our Islamic faith, that our action is devoid of any economic interests.

a) Achievement No. 1

In 1996 the city of Yaoundé saw a grave problem of violent scenes in the heart of the great Muslim community. The problem resulted from a divergence of view points on Islam and its practice among the so-called “traditionalist, conservative” Muslims, commonly known in the Haoussa language as “Darika”, who claim allegiance to the Tidjania brotherhood, and the so-called “fundamentalist” Muslims called “Isala” in Haoussa, who claim to represent the Wahhabite brotherhood. By “brotherhood” we understand here an association of lay people founded on religious principles.

This divergence of view points between the Darika and the Isala led to fights and the destruction of material possessions among brothers who had lived for a long time in peace. The basic consequence here has been the setting in of acute hatred, where one mistrusts the other, regardless of the family or affective ties which bind them together.

In the framework of this religious violence, we in our association, having outlined all the contours of the problem, created a peace committee. This committee was made up of members of our association, of administrative authorities, of religious leaders, of opinion setters and of certain members of the Muslim community.

For the committee, it was a question of using all means possible to reconcile the brothers who had formerly lived in peace and in solidarity, a task which we got down to with determination. And results followed, as at the end of various days of negotiation, of sermons and religious debates, peace finally returned among the brothers and we thus re-established a climate of safety in the heart of one and the same family.

b) Achievement No. 2

Still on the religious plane, Sarkan Zoumountsi undertook to resolve another problem in Yaoundé in 1998. This time it was a question of a problem among the members of the Muslim community and the members of the Cameroonian Baptist Church. The problem was tribal in origin. Two tribes from the North of Cameroon made war on each other here in Yaoundé. We had on the one hand the Haoussa tribe, of Muslim allegiance and on the other the Mou Fou tribe of Christian persuasion. Concretely, the association Sarkan Zoumountsi undertook to reconcile the two communities which are, after all, called to live together. To do this we used work sessions, meetings for debate with members of the two communities. In the end we re-established a climate of peace and safety and even saw to it that a foot bridge was built (over a canal) to link the two communities.

c) Achievement No. 3

At another level, our actions for the development of our target groups have grown through:

- The construction of foot bridges in the city of Yaoundé to open up certain isolated zones and help to bring sectors of the population together.
- The purchase of a minibus to transport school children.
- Educational talks to housewives and girls.
- The setting up of a programme for the pre-collection of household rubbish, the cleaning out of gutters and street sweeping.
- The creation of a Savings and Credit Co-operative.

## **2. How has our faith influenced the work of our Association?**

a) The case of the co-operative

In our association we took the initiative to set up a savings and credit co-operative to develop one another's initiatives efforts.

However, we should note here that we started off from the premise that we could not propose anything which goes against Islam; and in this case it is very important to make clear that people have their own criteria about what well-being is and these vary according to different human groups.

For example, within the framework of the working of our co-operative, the most important aspect which we want to highlight is that the practices which we applied are linked to the Islamic law which forbids anyone to seek interest in the sense of usury, and indeed our aim in this co-operative has never been to charge interest but to share the benefits and the risks in equal measure among the partners. To this effect Allah (the Merciful) says in the Holy Qur'an: "Those who live on usury shall rise up before God like men whom Satan has demented by his touch; for they claim that trading is no different from usury." Chapter 2, Verse 275. For it is said that Allah has permitted trading and made usury unlawful.

Again in the Holy Qur'an it is said, in Chapter 2, verse 276-279, that Allah destroys usury and makes alms flourish and he bears no love for the impious sinner.

"Oh Believers! Fear Allah and renounce what is still due to you from any interest, if your faith be true; or war will be declared on you by Allah and his messenger. If you repent, you may retain your principal, suffering no loss and causing loss to none."

All these recommendations led to the closing of our co-operative, owing to a lack of finance which allowed us to function following the rules of Islamic law.

In short, according to the above analysis, we can say that the seeking of interest is formally forbidden by Islam; and it brings no profit to him who seeks it.

#### b) The case of the struggle against AIDS

In the case of the struggle against AIDS, where good work is being done on the international scale and where everyone is trying to pitch in to stop the spreading of this scourge, we have also made our contribution but in a spiritual rather than a material way and following the guidance of Islam.

One of the most effective means in the struggle against AIDS, is the use of the condom. However, the status of this means of protection in the sight of Islam is really ambiguous.

Indeed, in Islam, the condom is seen as an ambiguous object in the sense that while it resolves one problem (protection from catching sexually transmitted diseases and HIV), it creates an other which is equally important: it encourages the growth of prostitution which is severely cracked down on by Islamic law. The fact is that in our association we refused partnerships and even finance from certain international bodies which are fighting against AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases because we do not share the same vision of the subject, even if we want finally to reach the same objectives.

In such a context, we focused our actions more on a change in behaviour following the recommendations of Islam, that one should be faithful to a single partner.

### **3. Other elements such as the support of religious institutions and how the work has been planned.**

At this level we receive technical support quite regularly from the Centre of Social and Sanitary Promotion (CASS) from Nkolndongo, based in Yaoundé. CASS is a Catholic religious institution which, apart from the technical support it gives us, presents and supports our projects before donors which allows us in most cases to carry out on the ground the projects we have planned.

On the other hand we also always have the religious leaders of the Muslim community (the Imams) and certain scholars who kindly give guidance and support to our actions in favour of the population.

#### **4. The reasons for the success of our actions**

Several factors are to be found among the reasons for the success of our actions. We can name among others the leaders of our association and the environment in which we are progressing.

##### **a) The leaders**

The Association Sarkan Zoumountsi is endowed with a group of dynamic and readily available leaders whose faith in Islam is not doubted.

The action of the leaders of our association under the protection of Islamic law allows us to say today that Sarkan Zoumountsi has participated to a certain extent in bringing about a change in the behaviour of our society.

##### **b) The environment and the characteristics of the society**

All the communities which are our target groups are genuinely committed to seeking ways and means of bringing about social peace, which is one of the most important pillars of development.

Starting from the kernel of Islam and its precepts, these communities become aware of their situation and seek to improve it. They all base themselves upon our plans of action in order to set up a plan for themselves. For example over the question of usury concerning the co-operative, all the communities embraced the Islamic vision on the seeking of interest.

#### **5. Difficulties encountered**

##### **a) Political hijacking**

In their efforts to get going within a political system characterised as multi-party, political leaders, who had no plan of action tried to take over and claim responsibility for some of our actions in the field of development, though these were in fact exclusively the initiatives of Sarkan Zoumountsi (the construction of foot bridges, for example). It is important to note here that we declare allegiance to no political party.

##### **b) SAP (Structural Adjustment Programme)**

The State carries out certain programmes without, however, taking into account certain non-governmental bodies. We can cite here the example of the establishment of the social dimension of the SAP - the social emergency programme - which consisted of a response to the problem of unemployment of young people but without taking into account certain social, economic and cultural aspects. This programme hindered our strategy of a participative and contributive approach which the population was already following.

##### **c) The lack of motivation of young people**

We should note here that young people, who are one of our most important target groups, often lack interest in our actions. They remain hemmed in by their despair and think that any action to change the situation will be in vain.

##### **d) Financial difficulties**

We often lack the basis to carry out our projects; without finance and left alone we can produce nothing. This is the case, for example, of the financing of the women's micro-project programme. Here we should note the incompatibility of our system of working based on Islam with that of the financial institutions.

### **III – CONCLUSION**

It is clear from our study that the association Sarkan Zoumountsi has fulfilled its objectives in several areas.

It has brought the notion of participative and contributive development to the community according to the Islamic principle: people should join together to defend and protect their interests.

On the other hand, on the spiritual plane, the association has encouraged an inter-faith rapprochement among Christians and Muslims. Living together has been made possible thanks to the efforts of all the communities.

We also note the setting up of an approach similar to the way of working of an NGO in an Islamic milieu.

#### **Assessment and Perspectives**

After about ten years of existence, the guiding idea of our movement is still on track. The assessment of our actions up to now is largely positive. We can observe a change of behaviour in the different sectors of the population, which has as its corollary the self-development of the most deprived people.

However, it is necessary to note that up to now the majority of donors are not ready to finance this form of development. Worse still, today a greater contribution from the very poorest is being called for.