



Research Article



Challenges of Agricultural Cooperatives and Prospects to Improve the Cassava Value Chain in the South West Region of Cameroon

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges faced by agricultural cooperatives in the South West Region of Cameroon, with a particular focus on the cassava value chain. Cassava plays a significant role in the Region's agricultural sector, serving as a vital staple crop and a source of income for many smallholder farmers. However, despite its importance, cooperatives engaged in cassava production and processing encounter numerous obstacles that hinder their productivity and overall development. This article analyses the key challenges faced by these cooperatives and proposes prospects for enhancing the cassava value chain. The study draws on the insights obtained from four workshops organised by the Agricultural Infrastructure and Value Chain Development Project (AIVDP) held in the towns of Kumba, Limbe, Mundemba, and Tombel. In each of the workshops, 25 cooperatives were invited – each represented by two members. By examining the cooperative system's limitations and identifying potential strategies for improvement, this article aims to contribute to the sustainable development of the cassava sector in the South West Region of Cameroon.

Keywords: Agricultural cooperatives, cassava value chain, challenges, prospects.

INTRODUCTION

The South West Region of Cameroon is characterized by its rich agricultural landscape, with cassava serving as a prominent crop. Cassava known by its scientific name as *Manihot esculenta* Crantz is a versatile or multipurpose crop and one of the most strategic crops throughout the tropical world. It is the main food or an essential part of the diet of more than half a billion people and it provides income for millions of farmers, processors and traders around the world.

The leaves, stems and roots are useful. The leaves can be used as a vegetable. The stems can be used as planting material and fuel wood. The bulking roots can be used to make different kinds of food for humans and animal feed. Apart from consumption, cassava can also be used as raw materials in industries to produce starch, glues, alcohol, bakery products, plywood, textile, paper and pharmaceutical products

Cassava is one of the crops that can resist long dry periods and can be successfully grown on less fertile

soils, giving reasonable harvest/yield where many other crops do not grow well. It has high-yielding capability, more productive per unit of land and labour.

The average storage root yield of cassava in traditional cultivation methods is 5-12 tonnes/hectare (FAO, 2019). However, by cultivating high-yielding (improved) varieties and following good agricultural practices, the yield can increase to 40-60 tonnes/hectare (FAO, 2019; Levai *et al.*, 2023).

The South West Region of Cameroon is blessed with a variety of agricultural raw materials that can stimulate the growth of processing industries. The strategy of value addition on agricultural produce provides plenty of opportunities for income generation, creation of employment and effective post-harvest management. Value addition is a sustainable initiative and an overall strategy for improving productivity, market competition, post-harvest losses management, food security and businesses.

Agricultural cooperatives play a vital role in supporting smallholder farmers and facilitating the development of the cassava value chain. However, these cooperatives face various challenges that limit their productivity and profitability. Limited access to credit and financial services inhibits their ability to invest in improved production techniques, equipment, and infrastructure (Soboh, 2015; Ngele *et al.*, 2016; Nkamleu *et al.*, 2019; Levai *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, inadequate infrastructure, such as transportation and storage facilities, hampers efficient cassava production and marketing (Molua, 2011; Fontem *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, a lack of technical knowledge and skills among cooperative members restricts their capacity to adopt innovative practices and technologies (Soboh, 2015; Nkamleu *et al.*, 2019). Pests and diseases pose further threats to cassava production (Oumar *et al.*, 2022), while inefficient post-harvest management practices lead to significant post-harvest losses (Fontem *et al.*, 2016).

The current government strategy for agricultural development revolves around a more intensive-based agricultural sector, which is stimulated by dynamic and growth-generating value chains that provide employment – this includes cassava (Oumar *et al.*, 2022). Even though cassava is produced mostly by smallholders in Cameroon, the country produced about 4,858,329 tonnes of cassava in 2020, placing the country 13th in the world for its contribution of about 1.6% of world production (FAOSTAT, 2020). Given that the demand for cassava and cassava by-products is on a steady increase, the importance of cassava is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. To promote cassava further and increase its production and utilization in Cameroon and exploit its income-generating potential while guaranteeing food security, the Agriculture Infrastructure and Value Chain Development Project (AIVDP) in collaboration with its partners recognized the need to develop the cassava value chain in the South West Region. Working in tandem with and through farmers' organisations, AIVDP aims to resolve various production, processing and marketing constraints.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Location

This study was carried out in the South and South West Regions of Cameroon (Figure 1). The Region is located at 5° 25' 00"N 9° 20' 00"E and covers an area of 24,571 km² (9,487 square miles) with a population of about 1.55 million people. It is divided into six divisions: Fako, Kupe-Manenguba, Lebalem, Manyu, Meme, and Ndian. The Region falls under the Agro-ecological Zone VI of Cameroon which is characterised by a humid forest zone (monomodal rainfall). This area has an altitude range of 0-50 meters above sea level with a humid tropical climate characterized by mean annual temperatures of 26°C (2.8) and a rainfall range from 2000-11,000 mm per year.

The agro-pastoral sector is characterised by the cultivation of cocoa, oil palm, rubber, and coffee and the raising of pigs, poultry, small ruminants and aquaculture (Okolle *et al.*, 2022)

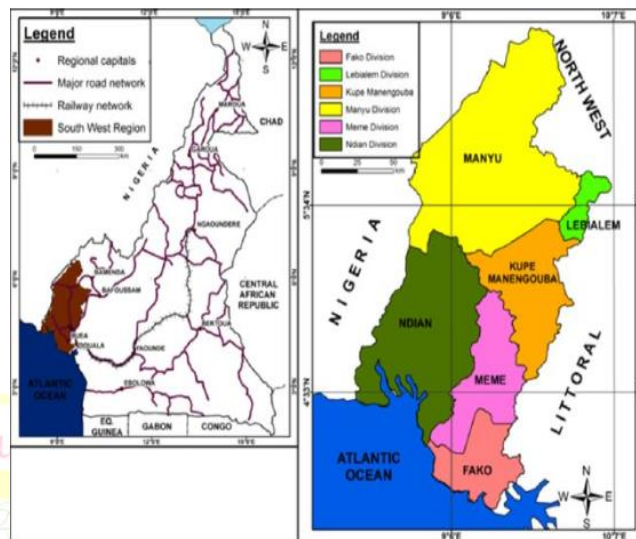


Figure 1. Map of the South West Region of Cameroon showing the Six Division

Workshops and Focus Group Discussions

This study employed a participatory approach, utilizing data obtained from four workshops held in four Divisional and Sub-Divisional headquarters of Mundemba, Kumba, Limbe, and Tombel bringing together participants (cooperators) from all six divisions. Twenty-five agricultural cooperatives participated in each workshop, with two members representing each cooperative. The workshops provided a platform for cooperative members to analyse the cassava value chain, sharing their experiences and insights on practical challenges encountered and possible solutions. Through focus group discussions, group work, questionnaires, and interviews, the participants' perspectives were gathered and analysed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Cassava Value Chain Map in South West Region of Cameroon

Several players operate in the cassava chain map in Cameroon, especially in the South West region. The Cassava Value Chain Map presents the major markets for cassava products, the major actors involved in the functions (production, processing, marketing and consumption of cassava and their products) and their relationships as they move products from the farms through to the end markets (Figure 1). This map shows links between the operators and the products at each stage of the value chain. From the map, most of the end products of cassava transformation are gari, water-fufu, miondo, bobolo, flour, starch and livestock feed.

The map so identifies the many actors involved in the production process of the cassava value chain in the

region as production, processing, storing, wholesaling, refining, packaging, retailing and marketing. Those actors are globally divided into three links such as raw material suppliers, processors and marketers.

The cassava value chain in Cameroon is supported by many institutions. The Ministries of Agriculture and Rural Development (MINADER), and AIVDP develop appropriate policies that will promote production, processing and export, disseminate and train producers on the use of improved varieties. Research institutions such as the Institute of Agricultural Research for Development (IRAD) and International Institute of Tropical Agriculture (IITA) - Cameroon conduct training and research on cassava, and its products as well as disseminate findings. The private sector actors intervene at the different segments of the chain especially in the supply of improved cassava cuttings, agrochemicals, processing equipment, loans and subsidies.

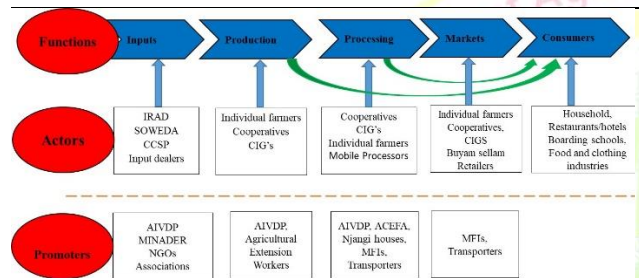


Figure 2. Cassava Value Chain Map for South West Region

Appreciation of Workshop Modules

During the workshops, the cassava value chain was analysed. For each segment, participants looked at the actors, their characteristics, income-generating potentials, constraints and coping strategies

Advantages of growing cassava

Growing cassava in the South West Region of Cameroon offers multiple advantages. The primary advantage is income generation, as reported by 25.30% of respondents. Additionally, 21.69% of respondents highlighted the benefits of growing cassava for both food and income. The advantage of cassava cultivation for consumption was mentioned by 18.07% of respondents, emphasizing its role as a staple food. With 8.43% of respondents mentioning processing, cassava can be transformed into value-added products. Other responses were similarly related to income generation, including improved food security, enhanced living standards, reduced hunger, and poverty alleviation. Cassava can serve as a reliable source of sustenance, providing essential carbohydrates and nutrients for the local population. These advantages demonstrate the potential of cassava cultivation to enhance economic well-being, food availability, and overall livelihoods in the South West Region of Cameroon.

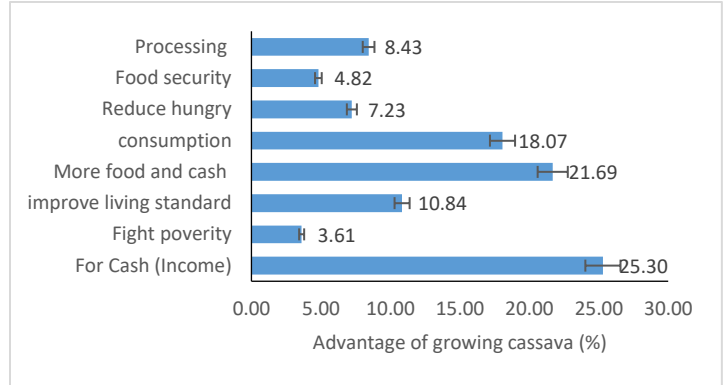


Figure 3. One main advantage of growing cassava

Time of planting cassava

The survey results indicate that farmers in the South West Region of Cameroon plant their cassava twice a year, with a range of $45.78 \pm 16.04\%$ (Table 1). Additionally, a significant proportion of farmers ($49.40 \pm 17.17\%$) reported planting their cassava once a year. However, there are a few farmers who plant their cassava three or four times a year. This variability in planting frequency reflects the diverse agricultural practices and strategies employed by cassava farmers in the region.

Table 1. Number of planting time of cassava

Number	Time of planting (%)
One	49.40 ± 17.17
Two	45.78 ± 16.04
Three	3.61 ± 1.56
Four	1.20 ± 0.70

Suitable months to plant cassava

The survey results indicate that there is variability in the preferred planting months for cassava in the South West Region of Cameroon. April was reported as the highest preference, with 20.48% of respondents choosing this month. March was the second most popular choice, selected by 18.07% of respondents (Figure 4).

A significant proportion of respondents (13.25%) reported planting cassava in both April and August, as well as in May and August. This suggests a strategy of planting cassava twice a year, taking advantage of favourable conditions in these months. March and August were chosen by 12.05% of respondents, indicating another preferred planting combination. On the other hand, the lowest percentage (1.20%) of respondents reported always planting cassava in April, June, July, and August, as well as in February and September (Figure 4). These findings illustrate the diversity in planting practices among cassava farmers in the region. The choice of planting months may be influenced by factors such as rainfall patterns, soil moisture conditions, market demand, and availability of labour. Farmers likely consider these factors when deciding on their planting schedule to maximize yield and productivity.

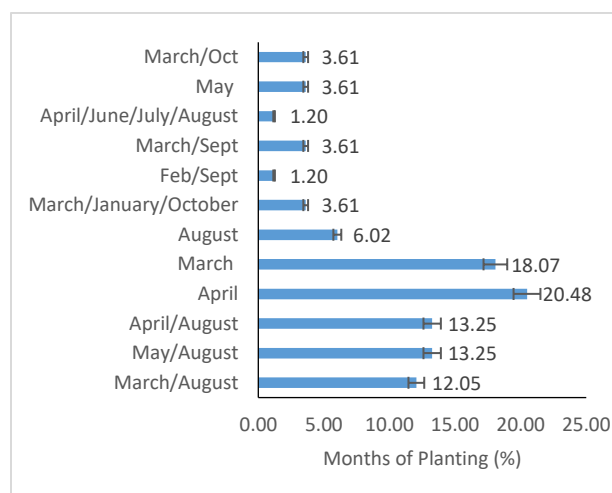


Figure 4. Which months do you usually plant your cassava

Problems in cassava cultivation

Farmers in the South West Region of Cameroon face several challenges in cassava cultivation. One of the major issues, identified by 25.30% of respondents, is the persistent presence of pests and diseases. Pests such as the cassava green mite and diseases like cassava mosaic virus can significantly reduce crop yields and impact farmer incomes. Another challenge, highlighted by 24.10% of respondents, is the inadequate availability of good-quality planting material. Poor quality or diseased planting material can lead to low productivity and hinder the establishment of healthy cassava crops. Lack of processing machinery is another concern, mentioned by 15.66% of respondents. Limited access to processing equipment hampers the value-addition potential of cassava, making it difficult for farmers to produce higher-value products like cassava flour, starch, or chips.

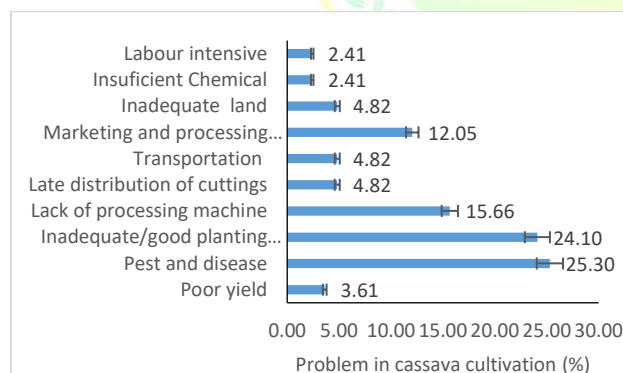


Figure 5. The major constraint in cassava cultivation

Marketing and processing materials (equipment, packaging and storage facilities) were identified as a challenge by 12.05% of respondents. Difficulties in accessing markets and processing materials can limit the profitability and marketability of cassava products, hindering the income potential for farmers (figure 5). These challenges indicate the need for interventions and support in the form of pest and disease management,

improved access to high-quality planting material, investment in processing machinery, and market linkages. Addressing these challenges can enhance productivity, income generation, and overall sustainability of cassava cultivation in the South West Region of Cameroon.

3.3.5 Learning Expectations in Cassava Value Chain Farmers in the region have various expectations in the cassava value chain. The highest expectation, mentioned by 26.51% of respondents, is the value addition on cassava (Figure 6). This indicates a desire to enhance the processing and diversification of cassava products, such as cassava flour, starch, or chips, to increase their market value and profitability.

Improving productivity is another key expectation, highlighted by 14.46% of respondents (Figure 6). Farmers aim to increase their cassava yields through the adoption of improved agricultural practices, such as better soil management and the use of quality inputs to improve soil fertility. A significant proportion of respondents (12.05%) expressed their interest in processing roots to gari, a popular local cassava product. This indicates a desire to engage in value-addition activities within the cassava value chain by transforming cassava into a marketable product (Figure 6).

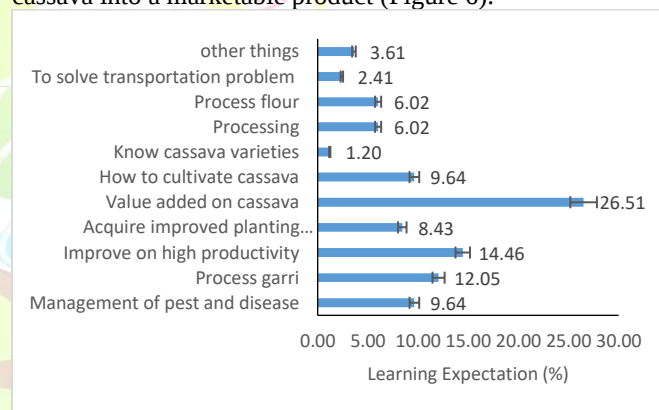


Figure 6. The major constraint in cassava cultivation

The management of pests and diseases was mentioned by 9.64% of respondents, reflecting the need for effective pest and disease control strategies to minimize crop losses and ensure higher yields. Farmers also expressed a need for improved techniques in the cultivation of cassava, with 9.64% of respondents emphasizing increased knowledge and skills in modern farming practices and technologies. Lastly, acquiring improved planting materials was identified as a priority by 8.43% of respondents, indicating a desire for access to disease-resistant and high-yielding cassava varieties. These expectations highlight the aspirations of farmers, ranging from value addition and productivity improvement to pest management and access to improved inputs. Meeting these expectations requires targeted interventions, including training programs, access to improved varieties, pest and disease management support, and investment in processing

infrastructure. These measures can empower farmers in the cassava value chain, enhance their income-generating potential, and contribute to the overall development of the cassava sector in the region.

CHALLENGES IN THE CASSAVA VALUE CHAIN IN THE SOUTH WEST REGION

The analysis of the workshops revealed several challenges faced by agricultural cooperatives in the cassava value chain. Limited access to credit and financial services emerged as a significant constraint, hindering cooperative members' ability to invest in improved production techniques, equipment, and infrastructure. Inadequate infrastructure, including transportation and storage facilities, posed challenges in the post-harvest stage, leading to losses and reduced market access. Furthermore, the lack of technical knowledge and skills among cooperative members restricted their capacity to adopt modern farming practices and technologies. Pests and diseases, such as the cassava mosaic disease and cassava brown streak disease, were identified as significant threats to cassava production. Additionally, inefficient post-harvest management practices, such as improper drying and storage methods, contributed to post-harvest losses.

Cassava is a staple food for many Cameroonians and plays a significant role in the local economy (Tanya *et al.*, 2014). The cassava value chain in the South West Region encompasses various stages, including production, post-harvest handling, processing, and marketing. Agricultural cooperatives play a crucial role in each stage of the value chain by supporting farmers in accessing inputs, providing training, and facilitating market linkages (Nkamleu *et al.*, 2019). However, several challenges hinder the smooth functioning of the value chain. These include limited access to improved planting materials, pests and diseases, and a lack of efficient post-harvest management practices (Molua, 2011; Fontem *et al.*, 2016).

Production Challenges

Limited access to improved planting materials is a significant challenge faced by agricultural cooperatives in the cassava value chain (Alene *et al.*, 2013). The availability of high-quality planting materials is crucial for increasing yields and improving the quality of cassava products. However, many cooperatives struggle to access these materials, leading to low productivity and inferior crop varieties (Fregene *et al.*, 2013).

Post-Harvest Handling Challenges

Inefficient harvesting methods and post-harvest handling practices (absence or poor state of farm-to-market roads and inappropriate transportation facilities) contribute to substantial losses in the cassava value chain. Improper drying methods, inadequate storage facilities, and insufficient knowledge of post-harvest handling techniques result in spoilage and reduced market value of cassava (Fungo *et al.*, 2015). These challenges lead to high production cost that affects the price of the finished products and sometimes to the outright abandonment of cassava farms. Addressing these challenges is crucial for

minimizing post-harvest losses and maximizing the economic potential of cassava.

Processing Challenges

Limited access to processing technologies and equipment poses challenges for cooperatives engaged in cassava processing (Sanni *et al.*, 2014). The lack of modern processing techniques hampers value addition and reduces the competitiveness of cassava products in the market. Cooperatives need support in acquiring and adopting appropriate processing technologies to enhance their efficiency and product quality.

Marketing Challenges

Marketing constraints are common challenges faced by agricultural cooperatives in the cassava value chain. Limited market access, price fluctuations, and inadequate market information hinder cooperatives' ability to sell their cassava products profitably (Yawson *et al.*, 2018). Strengthening market linkages, improving market information systems, and promoting collective marketing initiatives can help cooperatives overcome these challenges and achieve better market outcomes.

3.3.5 Financial and Institutional Challenges

Access to credit and financial services is a critical issue for agricultural cooperatives in the cassava value chain. Limited financial resources restrict cooperatives' capacity to invest in inputs, equipment, and infrastructure (Ugochukwu *et al.*, 2017). Numerous projects and programs now support cassava value chain development. However, a significant challenge is the lack of effective coordination among these initiatives, along with inconsistent policies that hinder support for the cassava value chain.

Additionally, investors view the cassava value chain as a high-risk venture due to inadequate infrastructure—such as poor road conditions and unreliable electricity supply—and the challenges associated with obtaining the necessary documentation for full operational status. Moreover, cooperators often lack sufficient collateral to secure loans from microfinance institutions or traditional banks.

Strengthening financial inclusion and establishing supportive institutional frameworks are essential for empowering cooperatives and enabling their long-term viability.

PROSPECTS FOR IMPROVING THE CASSAVA VALUE CHAIN IN THE SOUTH WEST REGION

To address the identified challenges and enhance the cassava value chain, several prospects were proposed. Improving access to credit and financial services through cooperative financing schemes and partnerships with financial institutions can facilitate investment in modern production techniques, equipment, and infrastructure. The development of infrastructure, including transportation and storage facilities, can improve market access.

Enhancing Access to Credit and Financial Services

Improving access to credit and financial services is crucial for agricultural cooperatives to overcome their financial constraints and invest in productivity-

enhancing measures. Establishing cooperative financing schemes and fostering partnerships with financial institutions can facilitate access to affordable credit and financial services (Akinbode and Adegboro, 2015).

Investing in Infrastructure Development

Investment in infrastructure development, such as transportation and storage facilities, is essential for improving the efficiency of the cassava value chain. Adequate transportation networks for example, good farm-to-market roads, enable timely delivery of cassava and cassava products to markets, while proper storage facilities help reduce post-harvest losses (Sié *et al.*, 2016).

Providing Training and Capacity Building Programs

Enhancing the technical knowledge and skills of cooperative members is vital for adopting modern farming practices, improving productivity, and enhancing the quality of cassava products. Training and capacity-building programs should be tailored to the specific needs of cooperative members, focusing on production techniques, post-harvest management, and processing technologies (Kato *et al.*, 2015). In today's competitive marketplace, effective branding and certification are critical components of successful marketing strategies, especially in capacity-building initiatives. These elements not only enhance visibility and credibility but also foster trust among stakeholders, including consumers, investors, and partners.

Pest and disease control is critical for maintaining healthy cassava plants and minimizing yield losses. Cooperatives should be supported in adopting integrated pest management strategies, including the use of resistant varieties, biocontrol methods, and proper sanitation practices (Alene *et al.*, 2013; Sié *et al.*, 2016). Additionally, promoting awareness and providing training on pest and disease identification and management can help cooperatives mitigate the impact of pests and diseases on cassava production.

Improving post-harvest handling practices is essential for reducing losses and improving the quality of cassava products. Cooperatives should be encouraged to adopt improved drying methods, proper storage facilities, and value-added processing techniques (Fungo *et al.*, 2015). Training programs on post-harvest management can equip cooperative members with the necessary skills and knowledge to handle cassava efficiently.

Restructuring the cooperatives

The profitability of smallholder cassava farmers in the value chain can be enhanced through cooperatives. Stakeholders must support existing cooperatives in restructuring to enable members to come together and address common issues such as commitment, trust, leadership, and transparency, thereby improving operational efficiency. Trust should be fostered not only among cooperators but also with other actors in the cassava value chain, such as financial institutions and exporters if they aim to establish sustainable vertical integration or industry alliances.

Enforcing the Import Substitution Policy

Resolving challenges in the cassava value chain can significantly bolster Cameroon's Import Substitution Policy by enhancing local production and promoting value-added products. By strengthening cooperatives and improving logistics, supply chains can be streamlined, making local products more competitive against imports. Additionally, fostering innovation and attracting investment in technology and infrastructure will create jobs and stimulate the economy. Building consumer trust in local goods through quality assurance and awareness campaigns can further reduce dependency on imported cassava-based products. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to sustainable economic growth and strengthen the resilience of the agricultural sector in Cameroon.

CONCLUSION

Agricultural cooperatives in the South West Region of Cameroon face numerous challenges in the cassava value chain, including limited access to credit, inadequate infrastructure, lack of technical knowledge, pests and diseases, and inefficient post-harvest management practices. However, there are prospects for improvement. Enhancing access to credit and financial services, investing in infrastructure development, providing training and capacity-building programs, implementing pest and disease control measures, and promoting efficient post-harvest management practices can enhance the cassava value chain in the region.

To achieve sustainable development, it is crucial for stakeholders, including government agencies, financial institutions, and development organizations, to collaborate and provide targeted support to agricultural cooperatives. By addressing these challenges and implementing the proposed prospects, the cassava value chain in the South West Region of Cameroon can become more resilient, productive, and economically viable, benefiting smallholder farmers, cooperative members, and the entire agricultural sector.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author here declares that there is no conflict of interest in the publication of this article.

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