

Considering the size of the villa in which we were received in his village in Bansoa on Saturday 16 April, it is impossible to believe that the person earning just 200 CFAF (less than 50 centimes of a euro) per day at the beginning of his career at age eighteen, has become one of the most outstanding industrialists in Cameroon's economic landscape today. Better still. With no higher education qualifications, Dieudonné Bougne is one of the forerunners of green business and the setting up of eco-businesses in Cameroon and in Central Africa, where the 'Groupe Bocom' is in full expansion: local processing of raw materials, industrial ecosystems, environmental preservation, support to local communities and the development of Africa are the primary obsessions of this exceptional entrepreneur.

## **Interview.**

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### ***Les Afriques : Who is Dieudonné Bougne ?***

I am Cameroonian, I have four wives and many children. Each of my wives is responsible for a finance department of businesses of 'Groupe Bocom' which I manage. I have a strong commitment to contribute to my country's development. As I progressed, I became aware of the need to seize other opportunities..

### ***Starting from scratch, you have become one of the industrial leaders in Cameroon and in Africa. How did you get there?***

It is a long story, but I would simply insist on a few important moments of my career. At 18, I worked in the sand exploitation sector with Nigerian nationals based in Cameroon. I was paid 200 CFAF/day to load and unload trucks of sand. At nineteen, I became a docker at the Port of Douala, despite the fact that I was a minor (in Cameroon, one reaches one's majority at twenty-one, Editor's note). My salary varied between 30 000 and 60 000 CFAF. After working at the port for seven years, I resigned. However, as soon as I started working at the Port of Douala, my aspiration was to make savings to start a sewing workshop. Thus, with my first salary I bought a sewing machine and I did some mending in the evening after work. « I simultaneously carried out the two activities, because in 1982 while I worked as a docker, I employed 42 workers in my sewing workshop. And that's not all... » At the same time, I managed taxis, tipper trucks for the transportation and sale of sand, as well as a maize and

tomato processing mill.

In addition to my docker's salary, I earned 100 000 CFAF (about 150 Euros) for all these activities undertaken concurrently. My resignation from the port was precipitated by a very difficult social context. Actually, my relations with the other dockers became tense because they could not understand why we were working together, even though I lacked nothing, earned a lot of money at a time when some of them could not even pay for their lunch. Between 1990 and 1992, my wife travelled to Togo and Benin to purchase goods for resale in Cameroon. As she was packing, we observed that the goods were marked « made in China ». Despite my wife's hesitancy, I decided we should get the goods directly from source and in 1994, we made our first trip to Hong-Kong...

***You embarked on import-export activities, notably between China and Cameroon. But, knowing that it is not easy to set up industries in Africa, how did you manage to succeed?***

In 1996, I went into partnership with a Cameroonian industrialist to set up Bocam, which collects waste oil and decants it before selling it. But, following a disagreement, we separated and I set up Bocom International in 2001.

***Despite this misadventure, it is worth stating that it was your idea to set up this activity of processing waste oil and waste, in general, as part of the « green business » niche. What motivated your decision to set up activities in the environmental sector?***

In 1996, while my wife and I were still travelling from Douala to Hong-Kong, the Swissair flight was full and we had to take Air France. On our arrival in Paris, there was no correspondence and Air France was compelled to provide us with accommodation. This was the first time we left the transit zone to set foot on European territory. I was struck by the cleanliness of the city of Paris and wondered why Cameroon could not be as clean. This motivation led me to set up an activity for the processing of hazardous waste which is the cause of several diseases. Today, Bocom incinerates 3 tons of waste and processes 800 batteries per day. For its part, the centrifuge processes 6 tons of oil per day. We have been trained by Americans to process hazardous waste (chemical products, hospital waste, waste oils and used filters) and batteries.

***Your very strong desire to set up activities does not go unnoticed...***

I have a passion for the development of Cameroon and Africa. We should show the world that we are capable of processing our raw materials and developing our country and our continent.

***If you don't mind, let us go back to your green economy projects. In addition to the green business initiatives already mentioned, your group develops eco-initiatives in polluting activities, like the management of petrol stations. Can you tell us more about this?***

The runoff water in petrol stations is reprocessed by Bocom. The same applies to soiled cloths and used filters. In parking spaces, we have barrels to collect waste and sewage oil which will then be recovered for reuse.

***LA: Within the framework of the companies' societal responsibilities, in addition to the environment, the 'groupe Bocom' is also engaged in many actions in the social field. What are they?***

We have effectively taken a certain number of social initiatives for our employees: Insurance, occupational medicine and social security contributions. All our employees participate in the National Provident Fund. For the local communities, we build and equip health centres and support the installation of water supply sites. With regard to this latter point, we have adopted the following strategy: Everywhere Bocom opens a petrol station, we build a borehole for the populations. We also build schools and churches for them. After I was awarded my first contract, I built a church in Bansoa, which is my village, and later asphalted a road section. We have also built mosques in petrol stations.

***You have not forgotten the city of Mélong where you grew up...***

Not at all I remember that during my childhood, to save kerosene, I used firewood to study. For this reason, I contributed to the rural electrification of my district, Mélong, to enable other youths to study in the best conditions. Thanks to an investment of 15 million FCFA (close to 23 000 Euros), about ten families were directly connected to the network. I was also able to provide six months of free electricity consumption to these inhabitants. The funding of the electricity distribution infrastructure made it possible for other inhabitants of the district to have electricity supply.

***LA: With a schedule like yours, how do you succeed in combining work and family life?***

I hardly have any entertainment, excepting with my children. Otherwise, my everyday life is occupied by work and family. I also travel a lot to visit my children abroad. Here in Cameroon, when I return home from work, I supervise my children's homework before playing with them. My other passion is praying and listening to religious music. I would also like to add that my greatest pride today is that my children are enrolled in the best schools and universities in the world.

***LA: What advice would you give to young Africans wishing to succeed in business like you?***

One should believe in what one is doing and be honest. In so doing, one succeeds in pulling through. Even if there are pitfalls, one's ambition should remain intact because that is the only way to achieve one's end. Today, for example, the "Société Générale des Banques du Cameroun" lends me 1 billion CFAF (1.5 million Euros) with no guarantee, and my personal guarantee alone is enough. Several banks are knocking at my door every day to make financing proposals. And yet, at the beginning of my activities, I had great difficulties to obtain a simple bank loan.

Interviewed by Thierry Téné and Josiane Maténe at Bansoa, Cameroon