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ASAFE: Strategic Challenges for E-Commerce Promotion in Central Africa

“The new technologies are a chance for women to close the gender gap in the Third World, but there is also a danger. Who is going to control the mouse or the computer terminal? It will be a big fight, and women are going to have to organize on their own, which is why I thought that Yitamben's program, ASAFE, in Cameroon is so valuable.”

—Richard Holbrooke
United States Ambassador to the United Nations, 2000

In June 2003, Gisèle Yitamben, Founder and President of *Association pour le Soutien et l'Appui à la Femme Entrepreneur* (ASAFE) in Cameroon was on her way to one of the organization's weekly board meetings. ASAFE was a network organization that empowers entrepreneurial women in Cameroon to take advantage of the opportunities that private enterprise and initiative can provide for the betterment of their own and their families' livelihood. Through a decade of hard work, Gisèle established effective international partnerships to secure market access for her growing client group. Gisèle had just met with Françoise Nono, a longstanding ASAFE member who ran a textile manufacturing facility in Douala, Cameroon, employing fifteen individuals, and catering mostly to markets in neighboring countries. ASAFE had encouraged Françoise and her partners to start their own business—in spite of a lack of start-up capital, business acumen or technical knowledge. Through their service portfolio, ASAFE provided women like Françoise microfinance, hands-on business education, counseling, and e-commerce support allowing them to become self-sufficient and bring prosperity to their communities. Gisèle was pleased to have witnessed how Françoise had created a solid business set for growth—without having access to traditional sources of financial capital.

Gisèle recalled the many obstacles ASAFE had encountered since the inception of its e-commerce project. Given the poor quality of Cameroon's technical infrastructure and people's caution toward the Internet revolution, even ASAFE's most innovative members were reluctant to engage in web-based business transactions. To give up its e-commerce activities was not an option in Gisèle's view—doing so would serve as a negative signal to others about the value of the Internet and set back her cause in the eyes of her fellow members. Since 1999, she had focused a major part of her efforts to bridge the digital divide in her country by taking measures to tackle the low level of e-readiness in the country. Promoting an effective movement to build up the e-readiness of Cameroon required the active support of multiple actors, including government officials, politicians and large players in the private sector. Because of the preponderance of unethical business practices, ASAFE had difficulties developing partnerships with many of the concerned parties, while at the same time maintaining and protecting its credibility vis-à-vis international donors. Given the constraint she faced, Gisèle focused on building international networks, which could also provide funding, instead of becoming overly involved with government officials and local business people, whose bureaucratic processes would drain valuable time and energy.

This case is based on extensive field research in Cameroon, which was undertaken by Research Associate Andreas Ernst and supervised by Dr. Maximilian Martin, Senior Project Manager at the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship, Fellow at the Center for Public Leadership at Harvard University, and visiting professor at the École des Hautes Études Commerciales at the University of Geneva. Martin and Ernst authored the case to serve as a basis for class discussion. It is not intended to illustrate either the effective or the ineffective handling of an administrative situation.

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But ASAFE had come to a crossroads and was facing a case of mission creep in the organization. ASAFE had been offered a US\$ 200,000 grant from an organization based in the U.S., to be used for programs that tackle HIV/AIDS in Cameroon. Such a request did not clearly fit into the mission and internal capabilities that the organization had developed up to this point. Yet Gisèle could not ignore the ravages that the epidemic had brought upon the continent—perhaps expanding to include HIV related programs would target one of the most pressing concerns of her country. Or should the organization focus its energies on addressing the e-readiness challenge—a long-term project as it required establishing and maintaining relationships with government officials and local business people?

The case for addressing HIV/AIDS was compelling. In 2000, twelve percent of Cameroon's population was estimated to be HIV positive. The country was woefully unprepared to deal with the epidemic, as it lacked both HIV/AIDS education and treatment facilities. From the late 1990s, dealing with HIV/AIDS had moved to the top of the agenda for most international, philanthropic, and non-governmental organizations. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation had just granted US\$ 28 million to a South African initiative that examined the effectiveness of latex diaphragms as a barrier for transmission of HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). In spite of their intentions, these organizations were finding it difficult to identify effective, transparent, and accountable organizations at the grassroots level, through which they could channel resources. While ASAFE had no experience in the field of health care, a number of donors had tried to persuade them to expand their programs to include HIV prevention and care. Pointing to the devastating implications of the disease for economic activity, some argued that fostering entrepreneurship meant getting into the business of disease prevention. From e-readiness to HIV/AIDS prevention, ASAFE had a wide range of strategic options—Gisèle needed to do some serious analysis, in order to choose the correct path for the long-term sustainability of the organization that she had put so much of herself to create. To look for inspiration, she decided to go over ASAFE's past strategy challenges.

The Creation of ASAFE

Born in Cameroon in 1956, Gisèle grew up under the Ahidjo government [see **Exhibit 1**]. Political oppression went hand in hand with relative economic and social stability. Ahidjo's literacy campaigns required every Cameroonian to attend at least seven years of school. For her first few years of schooling, Gisèle sat in the classroom alongside her mother. Living in a poor country, Cameroonian women were especially vulnerable to being disenfranchised. Gisèle remembered how almost daily, her favorite aunt relied on food and support from Gisèle's family to make ends meet for her own family. As a young girl, Gisèle swore to herself that one day, she would fight the indignity of poverty that women faced.

After graduating from high school in Yaoundé in 1976, Gisèle studied economics in Strasbourg (France), and went on to graduate school in Paris, and later obtained an MBA. Gisèle returned to Cameroon in 1982 to serve as a lecturer at the Pan-African Institute for Development in Douala, where she taught mathematics, as well as business, organizational and management skills to entrepreneurs. She discovered her passion for education in the process. While she was passionate about education, Gisèle lost her teaching job, due to her independent nature and need for tangible results. In her desire to see things evolve rapidly, she decided to become a consultant. Through the projects, she became an expert on the range of women's business activities in Cameroon. Gisèle learned that:

- Women represented 40% of Cameroon's total workforce; 85 % of them were employed in agriculture.
- Cameroonian women ran the majority of small and medium-sized enterprises in agriculture, transport, food and agro-business.
- Women managed 57% of Cameroon's informal sector companies.
- The companies managed by women in the formal and informal sectors typically were labor-intensive, whereas men ran capital-intensive firms.

Impressed by women's business savvy, vibrancy, and financial planning capability, Gisèle balked at the unfair restrictions they were facing. The combination of laws discriminating against women and the lack of support from governmental and private sector institutions hindered the success and development of women entrepreneurs. Moreover, the downturn of the economy in the early eighties had pushed education off the government's priority list.

To take concrete steps to address poverty, Gisèle founded ASAFE in 1987 as a non-governmental organization with the goal of addressing the issues that created an imbalance in economic opportunities for women. Cameroon's legal system prevented ASAFE from starting operations right away, as there was at the time no distinction between an NGO, an association or a political party. Consequently, the government considered ASAFE to be an entity with a political purpose, making it very difficult for Gisèle to establish her organization, as she had to bear with complicated registration procedures. With a multi-ethnic population, Cameroon was keen on seeking ethnic balance in the public and private sectors. What mattered were the personal profiles of the founder and its board, not the organization's mission. Gisèle did not know women of every major regional background interested in creating and leading ASAFE. Through her perseverance, she managed to recruit a "pro-forma" board with members from a wide range of ethnic and educational backgrounds, including businesswomen, educators, lawyers, and bankers. After fulfilling all requirements, ASAFE was finally registered and made official in 1989, two years after the original application had been filed.

ASAFE's objectives were as follows:

- To promote alternative financing by facilitating access to loans and credits for micro and small entrepreneurs who are unable to meet formal lending institutions' collateral requirements.
- To build organizational and managerial capabilities, upgrading business skills and providing outreach to enterprises and groups at the grassroots level.
- To promote self-employment.
- To orient women and women's enterprises towards new lucrative business opportunities available in their immediate environment.

ASAFE gave priority to individual women entrepreneurs, and to micro and small enterprises owned or controlled by women and youth. But because of the existing legislation, relegating ASAFE to a political initiative, its activities were under continuous government and police surveillance.

In 1990, a new law recognized associations as a legal entity different from organizations designed to participate in the country's political process. Activities in the domain of socioeconomic development continued to be defined as "village activities." The law stipulated that they be financed by association members. Associations could not legally receive donations. Notwithstanding, under considerable pressure from international donors, ASAFE received donations from the mid-nineties onwards.

Although NGOs were finally recognized in 1998, their activities were characterized as commercial. Therefore they were subject to the same taxation as businesses operating in the same sector, except the corporation tax. Donations became fully legal, provided they financed specific projects, rather than investments into the infrastructure of the NGO in question. Due to its perseverance, ASAFE received clearance for external funding from the Japanese government for the construction of its new headquarters and education centers in Douala.

Upon inception, ASAFE was a modest operation. In addition to Gisèle, its staff consisted of six teachers with different backgrounds, as well as Gilbert Kouotang, an accountant [see **Exhibit 2**]. In addition to its full-time staff, ASAFE hired staff on a temporary basis for specific projects. As an organization dedicated to dealing with female poverty, ASAFE preferred to employ women. In addition to the organization's headquarters in Douala, Cameroon's main port, ASAFE had branches in the southwestern, western, central and southern provinces. At headquarters, staff met at least once a week to discuss operational and strategic problems. While every employee was in charge of a specific program or field, the staff's core competencies ranged across different fields—everybody was partially engaged in every project. ASAFE, consequently, was non-hierarchical in organizational structure.

Taking Business Education to Scale

To seriously tackle female and youth poverty, ASAFE had to get involved in a number of activities ranging from microfinance to professional training for micro-enterprises. Due to resource constraints, program initiation had to be staggered. In 1989, Gisèle began by leveraging her core competence: business education. Business knowledge and skills were a necessary condition for economic advancement. Access to financial

resources would be vastly more meaningful if paired with business literacy. To help students put theory into practice, and proprietors of small enterprises manage their businesses efficiently, ASAFE added counseling, research, case studies and project management to its portfolio of services.

ASAFE's first educational program consisted of twenty to thirty hours of course work in business practices, spread over a period of six months. The program was a comprehensive training package. It covered the concept of credit, adaptive management, marketing, pricing, and revenue calculations, and business plan development. Gisèle wanted to provide concrete support for existing micro and small enterprises and other individuals seeking to set up their own businesses. Tuition was moderate: 10,000 Francs CFA for female, and 15,000 Francs CFA for male students [US\$ 37 / US\$ 55; see **Exhibit 3**]. Payment in installments was possible. Rather than a traditional user fee, ASAFE structured the tuition as a membership fee. During the duration of the training, the trainees and micro-entrepreneurs in good standing could elect representatives to a steering committee involved in the management of the program. The public response was overwhelming. The program attracted about 500 trainees and micro-entrepreneurs in its first year. ASAFE extended the portfolio of training courses and adjusted the duration and nature of the programs to better serve its entrepreneurs' needs. By 1991, ASAFE was running eight different programs, directed by five teachers. The programs were self-financing, but revenues were too low to allow for further expansion. To take the education program to a larger scale, Gisèle began to look for external funding.

By the end of 1992, Gisèle had identified three donors:

- Coopération Française, the French foreign ministry's development assistance arm, donated US\$ 60,000.
- The General Board of Global Ministries, the international arm of the United Methodist Church, supported ASAFE with US\$ 16,000.
- The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) donated US\$ 6,000.

In 1993 alone, over 1,000 women entrepreneurs and youth were enrolled in ASAFE's training programs.

ASAFE Goes Microfinance

Gisèle did not lose track of the other levers for economic advancement. Next to business expertise, lack of capital was the most important barrier to growth—hence the move into microfinance. Given the difficulty to obtain credit, ASAFE had to make financial resources available to women entrepreneurs and disadvantaged youth. The majority of the poor, particularly women, were involved in economic activities where real rates of return were high and repayment cycles short. While poor, they were nevertheless willing and able to repay, provided lending levels matched repayment capacity. Forced to borrow from moneylenders, informal borrowers paid interest rates that far exceeded the prevailing market rate. Gisèle studied the theory and practice of microfinance programs to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge. She was singularly impressed by the history of Grameen Bank in Bangladesh, founded by Muhammad Yunus in 1972. Its model and client base, ninety per cent of them women, inspired her.

Gisèle completed three studies between 1986 and 1991, which provided the conceptual backbone of the program. Her study "Access to Credit for Women in Africa," commissioned by the African Development Bank (ADB), revealed that lack of access to factors of production such as land, technical services, and credit was the primary cause of women's economic marginalization. The conclusions drawn by Gisèle's two other studies—an analysis of the income-generating activities of 46 women's groups and a second of 120 micro and small enterprises owned and or managed by women—were sobering as well. Without additional assistance, most enterprises would remain at subsistence level. The following barriers to growth were particularly important:

- *Structural.* Women's enterprises were small, had too few qualified personnel, and unproductive governance structures.
- *Society and culture.* Local culture did not reward risk-taking and innovation, and did not value transferring existing traditional practices of credit and savings to women's economic activities.

- *Finance.* Women's enterprises suffered from a low capacity to save, working capital constraints, and lack of access to bank credit. Most activities were not profitable enough to meet the high hurdle rate associated with borrowing from informal-sector moneylenders.
- *Infrastructure.* Geography and infrastructure created high transport and transaction costs, paired with lack of processing infrastructure to preserve perishable products. There were also systemic imbalances between different regions.

Gisèle pondered on the question what could be done to help women generate stable, consistent, and increasing incomes. During a World Bank workshop that convened African women researchers and activists to discuss women and development, Gisèle met Edward Jaycox, the World Bank's Vice President for the African region. The workshop addressed issues such as the environment, women in business, education, and the role of communications, health, and macroeconomic reform. Citing the example of SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association), an Indian NGO based in Ahmedabad, Gisèle emphasized the quintessential role of access to productive resources as a prerequisite for successful economic empowerment. She insisted on the need to learn from successful examples of organizations in the South. Jaycox was impressed and decided to launch a South-South study in India to look at parallels and alternative solutions. The trip would be led by Gisèle.

SEWA had undertaken a whole set of activities over several decades to improve women's lives, including microfinance. SEWA's ambition and effectiveness inspired Gisèle. This was the development model Gisèle had in mind for Cameroon. Women were better entrepreneurs than men were. Poor women almost seemed to have an instinct to save—they tirelessly planned for their children's future. Given the right tools and opportunities, they would excel at creating wealth.

The "Femme-Crédit-Épargne" program ("Women-Credit-Savings"), which was initiated in 1993, extended credit to promote savings. The scheme built on traditional practices, based on solidarity groups comprising at least five women. At the beginning of a group's credit history, a small loan was made available to one of its members. The repayment period ranged from one to three years. As trust solidified over time, the group began to qualify for higher loans. To access the scheme, every new member had to become part of a group and pay the "solidarity guarantee," a deposit fee of 10,000 Francs CFA per person. It was up to group members to decide who would obtain a loan first. Failure to repay would disqualify every group member from eligibility for future loans. While ASAFE's initial donors were worried about the success of the program, it proved very popular. Revolving credit initially ranged from 50,000 to 200,000 Francs CFA (500 US\$ - 2,000 US\$). After a major devaluation of the currency in January 1994, credit lines were adjusted to 150,000 - 600,000 Francs CFA.

In 1994, ASAFE provided loans to 300 entrepreneurs, most of them women. Rapidly, Gisèle realized that even loans of 600,000 Francs CFA were insufficient to provide a solid capital basis for certain small ASAFE member enterprises. To become truly sustainable, firms needed capital to make investments in machinery or hire qualified workers. ASAFE had planned to support micro and small entrepreneurs to accumulate solid revenues and devise a business plan. Once accomplished, ASAFE would then send them on to a traditional bank. But the strategy folded with the advent of the competitive devaluation of the Franc CFA. The need for alternative financing programs suddenly became vastly more acute. The government closed down Cameroon's only remaining governmental source of capital for small enterprises, the "Fonds de Garantie et d'Aide aux Petites Entreprises" (FOGAPE). The banking sector became more reluctant to work with small entrepreneurs as well. Banks imposed unrealistic lending prerequisites, which were modeled after much larger industry clients. Loans had to be both secured by property and guaranteed by an individual. These preconditions put capital out of reach of most ASAFE entrepreneurs. Micheline Nguekam, an ASAFE member since 1993, sold locally produced plastic shoes and had a profitable business. She wanted to expand by moving into a bigger store, but no bank was willing to grant her a loan.

ASAFE faced a dilemma. Gisèle had never planned to teach, counsel *and* provide significant financing to entrepreneurs who ran the bigger small-scale or medium-scale enterprises. Neither did ASAFE have the financial means to act as a source of finance, nor the necessary expertise in consulting, teaching and preparing such entrepreneurs for a new business environment. This required much more elaborate business coaching. Should ASAFE depart from its core skill set? Clearly, if ASAFE failed to support entrepreneurs at this critical juncture, it would end up undermining the organization's credibility.

In 1996, ASAFE started taking deposits, launching Alaji, a daily savings program. It was designed to enable women to slowly increase their working capital, and to save funds for investments in their children and their education. Women's savings were minimal—no local bank wanted to serve them. At any rate, most members of the target group lacked the time to queue up in front of bank cashiers. Many also shied away from the banking system, because they were unable to read and write, and thus could not fill out their forms. In response to the void, ASAFE staff was prepared to listen, help fill out forms and guide clients in their business activities. They worked at Market Madagascar, one of Douala's three busiest markets. The Alaji program started taking the deposits of 200 market women. By 1998, it had collected savings from over 2,000 clients.

In 1997, ASAFE initiated an additional program to make credit available to individuals. Similar to the earlier scheme, a group acted as a guarantor; however, only one borrower was foreseen. The group and the borrower had to work out internal transfer payments for collectively shouldering the risk of default. Risk sharing allowed for loans ranging from 600,000 Francs CFA to 3,000,000 Francs CFA to a single individual. ASAFE had begun to take care of small enterprises with the capacity and expertise to become medium-sized enterprises. Gisèle was dismayed that Cameroon lacked the proper financial institutions for this target group as well. In 1997 ASAFE granted 500 loans to small entrepreneurs. But merely providing financial resources would have been insufficient. ASAFE had to get into the business of opening up new markets for its constituents as well. Gisèle began to establish a network of relationships with entrepreneurs in other African countries. To integrate these entrepreneurs into the ASAFE network, Gisèle frequently traveled to neighboring countries to invite prospective members to Douala for workshops. One year later, ASAFE's network had become truly regional. Entrepreneurs routinely exchanged market information, assisted each other on their respective home markets, and established numerous cross-border trading partnerships. An ASAFE loan of 2,000,000 Francs CFA allowed Micheline Nguekam to establish a new store. To provide a greater variety of shoes, she began importing shoes from the Ivory Coast and Nigeria. By 1998, five per cent of ASAFE member entrepreneurs were living outside of Cameroon.

Building a Network of Relationships

Gisèle's trip to India in 1992 to visit SEWA and study its microfinance model had brought a workable model to Cameroon for the first time, based on peer monitoring and the extension of credit to generate savings. The international donor community and especially the World Bank had begun to take a serious interest in ASAFE's activities. After the implementation of ASAFE's microfinance program in 1993, Gisèle was considered an expert on microfinance in Africa, and became a sought-after speaker on the subject. From April to May 1995, the Central African Republic, through its Ministry for the Promotion of Women and Social Action, called on ASAFE to put in place a mechanism to support the economic empowerment of women. The work was supported by the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA) and the Canadian Organization for Solidarity and Development (OSCD), and executed in collaboration with experts from the Central African Republic. The implementation had to be interrupted seven months later due to the civil war that ravaged the country. Similarly, Rwanda asked ASAFE in November 1997 to implement a microfinance program in January 1998 for urban and rural populations around Kigali. Rather than celebrating, Gisèle focused on the work that remained to be done to consolidate existing regional contacts and to expand the network. She constantly reminded her staff that international contacts were more vital than ever.

Balancing the need to build working relationships with international donors and work on the ground rapidly became a challenge. In 1994, the World Bank asked Gisèle to carry out a participatory poverty assessment of Cameroon's urban areas. Gisèle thought that focusing exclusively on building relationships with international donors was a mistake, and was inclined to turn down the Bank's request, as it would distract her from the work in Cameroon. But she recognized that securing resources for existing and new projects was impossible without substantial assistance, donations and political support. In the end, Gisèle carried out the World Bank assessment. It made ASAFE's projects known to a wider audience. For her contribution to the advancement of the status of women in Africa, Gisèle received the Theresa Hoover Community Service and Global Citizen Award from the General Board of Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church in the United States in November 1994.

The World Bank signaled interest in a closer collaboration, with Gisèle inviting World Bank representatives to visit the ASAFE headquarters. In 1996 Gautam Kaji, one of the World Bank's managing

directors, visited ASAFE's headquarters after having been received by the President of Cameroon. The visit generated substantial national and international media attention. Kaji was enthusiastic about the self-financing character of ASAFE's projects. "This is an organization that is worthwhile to support," he argued and offered to help look for donors. Kaji invited Gisèle to present ASAFE's activities to ambassadors and high-ranking NGO representatives. She impressed the ambassadors of Canada, Japan and the United States, as well as the representatives of the European Commission and the German technical cooperation (GTZ). The meeting marked a turning point. After visiting ASAFE and its members, the ambassador of Japan offered to contribute US\$ 110,000 for the construction of ASAFE's new headquarters. Other awards began to accumulate. In 1996, Gisèle received the Laureate of Comité de l'Excellence Africaine award for her contribution to socioeconomic advancement of the underprivileged in Cameroon.

By 1997, ASAFE had established significant and strong international links. By working closely with the World Bank on the report on poverty, even at the risk of deflecting attention from her local projects, Gisèle gained credibility and international stature, leading to access to international networks that enabled ASAFE to start new projects and to carry them out more effectively. ASAFE's relationship with the Japanese as a donor government derived a level of legitimacy necessary that facilitated dealings with local authorities. In contrast, most other NGOs in Cameroon found themselves in a weak and dependent position. Further, many NGOs were in fact shell organizations set up by politicians and civil servants.

Taking the New Economy to Cameroon

By 1998, ASAFE had accumulated a substantial body of expertise in its domains of involvement. Its programs responded to the most pressing needs faced by small entrepreneurs, and were operating at full capacity. About 120 entrepreneurs enrolled in the educational program in every term. The Alaji program now counted about 3,000 savers. ASAFE's microcredit program channeled capital and business advice to about 500 entrepreneurs a year. The client portfolio had begun to stabilize and become increasingly international, with eight per cent of ASAFE members coming now from Benin, Chad, Congo, the Republic of Central Africa, Gabon, the Ivory Coast and Zambia. Having just moved to its new headquarters, office space suddenly became ample. Gisèle asked herself and her staff—where should we take ASAFE next?

One dilemma that Gisèle faced was whether to use the additional resources expanding access to existing programs for more clients, rather than establishing new product lines for her organization's clients. Through grassroots organizations and NGOs in rural and urban areas, ASAFE reached out to a significant number of entrepreneurs and individuals—but it would also be possible to replicate existing programs in underserved areas. ASAFE's international links, membership and partnership portfolios necessitated tackling the issue of knowledge exchange in a more formal fashion. But face-to-face interaction was costly and often impractical. Regional networks could extend easily, provided more sophisticated channels of communication were established, opening up additional growth opportunities for ASAFE entrepreneurs. Resources used for information technology (IT) could dynamize regional and international networks, facilitating knowledge transfer.

Gisèle had been intrigued by the prospects of IT in developing countries since 1994. Concerned about the growing divide in access to information technologies, she had followed advances in industrialized countries closely, although Gisèle could not necessarily be described as a "techie." The 1995 UN Conference on Women in Beijing brought to her attention the need for women's equal access to IT resources in developing countries. At the time, Cameroon and most African countries in the region were not even connected to the Internet [see **Exhibits 4 and 5**]. Leveraging information technology for its members seemed the logical next step for ASAFE. In the long-run, IT could help reduce the search and transaction costs that remained an important barrier to growth. If ASAFE entrepreneurs could operate via a cost-effective system that bypassed middlemen, they would be able to claim a sizeable fraction of the gains of international trade. After all, goods by rural artisans and artists trading at US\$ 5 in a developing country could often be sold at US\$ 70 or more internationally.

At an Internet training workshop for women, organized by the Toronto-based Networked Intelligence for Development (NID) in Nairobi (Kenya) in 1998, Gisèle decided that it was time for ASAFE to implement IT infrastructure in Cameroon, taking care to assure equal access to women. She presented her vision to her staff

members. Opinions were divided. Some wanted to concentrate on the old projects. Others argued that ASAFE should take on a new challenge and view it as an opportunity to better serve the needs of its clients. During most of the meeting, Gilbert Kouotang, the ASAFE accountant and employee with the longest tenure remained almost silent. But at some point he stood up and said: “In 1997, we decided to support enterprises needing reliable access to capital. At the time, we made a commitment to look for new business opportunities for them.”

Gilbert Kouotang and Odile Mantsogang, the head of ASAFE’s microfinance program, reminded the team that ASAFE had resolved many challenges in the past, and would continue to do so. In 1993, the “Bayam sellam,” the retailers of fresh produce at a market in Douala, called on ASAFE to help them resolve a whole set of issues, including funds for acquiring merchandise, how to store and conserve unsold products, and how to deal with the irregular supply of products. Everyone was surprised how fast ASAFE delivered. Within three months, ASAFE had set up a workable mechanism that addressed the concerns of the retailers. To deal with the liquidity constraints, ASAFE organized the women into groups of twenty to enable them to raise substantial savings. The quantity of fresh produce given to each member of the group corresponded to the percentage of individual savings that the member had contributed to the communal fund. To store their products, the women acquired an enclosure in March 1994. At the end of each business day, the women paid a fee for storing the remainder of their unsold merchandise until the next day.

Following Kouotang and Mantsogang’s arguments, ASAFE decided to go ahead, and partnered with the Founder and Director of NID, Nidhi Tandon.

In 1999, ASAFE conducted a weeklong training session and trade fair in Douala. Its list of sponsors read like a who’s who of international organizations, and included the World Bank/Infodev, United Nations Development Program (UNDP), and the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). Dubbed the “First Cyber Forum of Women Entrepreneurs of Africa and the Diaspora,” the event aimed at familiarizing African women with e-commerce and communicating what successful engagement meant. One hundred women entrepreneurs from seventeen African countries attended the Cyber Forum, as well as experts from the United States, Canada and Europe. They seized the opportunity to meet and discuss potential business alliances. The event introduced participants to a number of issues, ranging from quality standards for packaging to creative methods for international marketing. The sessions also went into business plan development, the Internet, web page design, working with digital cameras, and general computerization issues. The trade fair featured the participants’ products, including textiles, art, and processed agricultural products.

Agreement emerged that the main obstacle entrepreneurs faced were barriers to cross-border trade, within and outside Africa. In comparison, issues related to access to the Internet seemed relatively straightforward. Electronic communication and e-commerce provided additional business opportunities, as well as an easy means of alliance formation, both nationally and regionally. At the end of the event, several participants set up free e-mail accounts and decided to stay in touch electronically. When she participated in the Cyber Forum event, Kadri Aïssatou, a longstanding ASAFE member from northern Cameroon ran her own coffee manufacturing unit with five employees. She already sold coffee to Chad and Mali; but managing the corresponding business relationships was too costly to think of expansion. At the Cyber Forum, Kadri Aïssatou met a group of marketers. She later participated in their trade fairs and her products attracted interest from buyers, and with access to information technology, she could take on this new demand while dramatically reducing transaction costs. Within a few years, Kadri had tripled her staff and upgraded the packaging process and use of logos. She was thinking of buying additional machinery.

Moving into e-commerce was an attractive strategy option. But to deliver on its promises, substantial infrastructure investments were required. To capitalize on the potential benefits of dramatically lower costs of processing orders and payments, and access to additional markets, ASAFE had to set up first a viable e-commerce platform. But ASAFE did not have the technical competence to launch an e-commerce project on its own.

In 1998, the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) had set up a special initiative to promote the building of infrastructure and services necessary to support electronic commerce in developing countries. The goal was to provide secure and dependable electronic payment, transaction and escrow services to multiple independent businesses, tailored to the needs and objectives of the community, region or country in question, and most importantly, develop a service in which users would be able to have full confidence. To support the participation of women entrepreneurs in e-commerce, ITU provided technical support

for equipment selection, installation, and maintenance, as well as 100,000 Swiss Francs (US\$ 70,000) for equipment and accessories for Internet access for ASAFE and affiliated community centers.

At the 2000 Beijing + 5 Conference, Gisèle participated as a panelist on “Bridging The Digital Divide.” Through her efforts, she secured a US\$ 40,000 financial contribution from Chell.com toward establishing a connectivity backbone. More importantly, she began a relationship with Cisco Systems that would later prove to be crucial in developing her organization. Later that year, ASAFE initiated seven different courses on how to conduct research on the Internet, how to be a webmaster, and how to improve literacy in Microsoft Office. Course fees ranged from 10,000 to 100,000 Francs CFA and were four to six months long. In the first months, 15 students attended the courses. Enrollment was constrained by the number of workstations available.

Cisco offered its Networking Academy Programs, which were aimed at bridging the digital divide and reducing gender-based inequalities in access to IT. Cisco provided women with access to information and communication technology (ICT) skills. From 1999, Cisco had established Networking Academy Programs in ninety-six countries, twenty-eight of them among the world’s poorest—yet none in Africa. In 2001, Cisco and ASAFE opened the first Cisco Learning Network Center in Africa. Open to secondary school and university students, it offered a six-to-twelve months training course in IT to thirty students, taught by two professional full-time trainers.

The launch of the IT initiative rapidly resolved the under-utilization of office space in ASAFE’s four-story premises. The first floor was open to the public for general inquiries and information. It also hosted a cyber-boutique with twenty-seven computers for public access. The second and third floors were dedicated to training rooms, which included computer training facilities and an incubator area for IT enterprises. The fourth floor hosted ASAFE’s staff offices and meeting rooms.

Constraints on E-Commerce Promotion

Promoting information technology and e-commerce in central Africa amounted to revolutionizing business for local micro and small entrepreneurs. Beneficiaries of ASAFE’s training programs soon realized the enormous potential spreadsheets and word-processing offered for self-organization and efficient production. Learning how to surf the Net made communication with partners in Asia and other African countries cheap and easy. In 2000, entrepreneur Françoise Nono began to source textiles from suppliers in Asia whom she had found through the web. Three years later, she had already gone five times to China for business. She did not trust the Chinese suppliers though—if she completed the whole transaction via Internet she would receive inferior quality, she feared.

Based on such anecdotal evidence, Gisèle wondered why her entrepreneurs used the Internet mainly to explore and initiate commercial relationships, but did not rely on it much to manage the exchange of goods. Françoise Nono’s recent trip to Hong Kong was a case in point. She had always been an early adopter—product inquiries and orders via Internet allowed her to reduce her journey to a few days; but she still felt she had to personally go to hand over the money and to bring back the textiles herself. Gisèle wondered whether her continued reluctance to make payments over the Internet ought to be taken as a sign to reshape ASAFE’s implementation strategy vis-à-vis IT dissemination. Public response to the education programs and IT facilities had been outstanding. ASAFE hosted one of two certified Cisco training centers in Cameroon and the country’s only Pearson VUE testing center. ASAFE’s center was opening the world of IT to people without a tertiary education. ASAFE’s working relationships with governments, NGOs and companies at the international level were excellent. Notwithstanding, Gisèle was not satisfied. She decided to thoroughly review ASAFE’s achievements and to identify the remaining obstacles to the successful implementation of e-commerce.

In 1999, the International Telecommunication Union had agreed to set up IT infrastructure for 119 users on ASAFE’s premises. The resource center provided training and Internet access as well as promoting e-commerce. Fixed-line connectivity was so poor and obsolete that the ITU asked Cameroon Telecommunications (Camtel), the national telecommunications provider, to set up a wireless connection. Wireless connectivity turned out to be less straightforward than anticipated. The project coincided with a complete restructuring of the country’s telecommunications sector and the privatization of state carriers. As part of the restructuring process, Camtel received a four-year monopoly over fixed-line and Internet provision,

as well as long-distance networks. In spite of privatization, Camtel and government officials remained closely interlinked. Some government ministers were setting up e-commerce pilot projects themselves. The installation of ASAFE's wireless connection was constantly postponed for fairly vague reasons. At first, experts argued that the surrounding trees in the neighborhood were too high and interfered with the frequency. ASAFE had the trees cut. Now the angle of the aerial had to be adjusted. Camtel demanded an annual fee of nine million Francs CFA for the aerial. After a long negotiation process with Camtel, the aerial was finally installed in September 2001. The annual fee for the wireless connection ended up costing ASAFE six million Francs CFA. Finally the slow fixed-line connection was history and the new wireless connection operational.

From E-Commerce to E-Readiness

Creating effective payment channels was a necessary condition for e-commerce and for bringing down overall transaction costs. Entrepreneurs also looked to ASAFE for assistance in the management of trade risks and obstacles, and effective international marketing. International banks provided effective payment mechanisms, but fees varied with risk. In the case of a transaction between a Chinese and a European party, the cost of settlement was about 0.1 per cent of the traded volume; if a Central African and a Chinese party traded with each other, transaction costs rose to three to six per cent. If a short trip from Yaoundé to Hong Kong cost 2,000 euros, the traded volume thus had to exceed 40,000 to 85,000 euros to make traveling worthwhile.

Physical delivery channels needed dramatic improvements as well. Cameroon's postal service was not reliable. Goods had to be sent with expensive private freight carriers, and the recipient had better be present when the goods cleared customs. Entire containers disappeared at Douala harbor. As a result, people often accompanied their shipment the whole trajectory. ASAFE entrepreneurs often invested almost their entire working capital in the goods they imported and exported, and could not risk that the merchandise never arrived. Cameroon and its neighbors had been ranking close to the top in Transparency International's annual corruption report for some time now.

In short, for Gisèle, three main factors set the parameters for the speed with which e-commerce could be implemented:

- Poor governmental and commercial infrastructure
- Lack of public acceptance
- High hardware and software prices

For Gisèle, ASAFE's e-commerce activities had reached a level where external infrastructure and policy constraints had become stifling. To deliver their full potential, ASAFE had to take steps to displace these constraints. Since ASAFE's success in pursuing e-commerce was ultimately linked to advancements in its immediate environment, two different routes seemed worthy of serious consideration:

- First, ASAFE could broaden its efforts and pursue e-readiness [see **Exhibit 6**]. This meant entering a new domain of action and engaging domestic actors as well as placing increased emphasis on education projects.
- Second, ASAFE could adopt a wait-and-see attitude, and downscale its e-commerce efforts until constraints were lowered and conditions were ripe. This path had the danger that the technical knowledge and IT-related contacts and knowledge acquired over the past two years might become obsolete. While it seemed that the prospect of ASAFE members trading their goods online would not materialize any time soon, Yitamben was hardly the type of person to wait on the government to deliver on e-readiness.

Could an expanded IT agenda over-stretch ASAFE's institutional capabilities? What were the implications of closer collaboration with domestic actors in terms of existing working arrangements with international partners? Access to international donor and policy-making networks distinguished ASAFE from many other local and regional NGOs. For twelve years, Gisèle had provided her international partners with reliable data and information. Many considered her a charismatic leader and were highly impressed by the success of her work. ASAFE feared that this position of strength would be diluted if local third-parties were involved in her projects, as she might not be able to control what they do and ASAFE's credibility vis-à-vis

international partners might suffer. At one of its meetings, ASAFE's board decided to continue with e-commerce. The consensus was that too much energy and resources had been spent on the project to terminate it. Compared to 1999, substantial progress had been made despite the lack of infrastructure and overall acceptance.

In April 2002, Gisèle announced a new strategic plan to tackle three areas:

- To develop partnerships with government to push for the creation of IT infrastructure and foster e-readiness.
- To establish relationships with local industry and the business community, to ensure that ASAFE's training programs met the IT needs of businesses, and to push for a leadership initiative in e-commerce and the Internet.
- To enhance and diversify ASAFE's training programs, focusing especially on imparting skills to structure international trade transactions in a transaction-cost minimizing fashion.

"This did not mark a strategy change but a strategy addition. We have not done anything wrong, we just have to do more", an ASAFE staff member argued. The Cisco Award for Exceptional Female Enrollment ASAFE received in 2002 seemed to confirm this view.

E-Readiness Promotion: The ITC Project

In 2002, ASAFE partnered with the International Trade Center (ITC) and Datamation, an Indian provider of integrated enterprise and business software solutions, to translate its e-readiness "strategy addition" into an action plan. ITC had the mandate to provide trade-related technical assistance to build national capacity in international trade, and developed close ties to the business sector. In 2001, ITC, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) added a gender dimension to their trade development strategies. Building on the infrastructure and technical support provided by the ITU, the ITC developed approaches to assist women entrepreneurs in moving up the trade value chain and use their specific skills to improve trade among and from developing countries. Gisèle initially had met with Lilia Naas from the ITC at the Cyber Forum in 1999. They discussed the challenges and prospects of electronic commerce informally and in 2002 decided to collaborate during a symposium being held in Yaoundé. For ITC, ASAFE was an ideal partner. The parties announced an extensive cooperation agreement for a three-year period.

The project pursued the following two objectives. First, ITC would assist ASAFE to build capacity to train and support its members to use ICTs as a business support tool for their international business operations. Specifically, ITC would:

- Assist ASAFE in adapting selected training materials and tools on using ICTs to enhance purchasing, financing, promotion and marketing operations, and to introduce case study-based teaching.
- Support ASAFE in creating case studies.
- Train ASAFE staff to act as advisors to support its members' new business initiatives.
- Assist ASAFE in identifying relevant business information sources and building a database that could be accessed over the Internet.
- Help to strengthen ASAFE staff members' information management.
- Enhance the content of the ASAFE web site, and upgrade it to become a portal for its members.
- Work with ASAFE in updating and publishing online the databases on women entrepreneurs' associations and sources of financing for women entrepreneurs.

As a second objective, the joint project would teach women entrepreneurs how to use the ICT knowledge they had acquired for business development and international business expansion. Specifically, ITC would:

- Assist ASAFE in selecting a pilot group of eighty women entrepreneurs for intensive training and consulting. A group of twenty women, drawn from four sectors—agro-business, handicrafts, textiles and services—, would be selected on the basis of the export potential of their products and services.

- Assist selected women entrepreneurs in identifying relevant commercial sites to promote their products and services.
- Link ASAFE's portal site to major search engines and other relevant Internet sites
- Work with ASAFE would provide a database for all its members with relevant information on international and regional suppliers and markets.
- Develop electronic promotion materials for products and services provided by the pilot group of trained women entrepreneurs, as part of ASAFE's portal under construction.

The project was funded by the Commonwealth Secretariat, the Agence de la Francophonie and the Canadian International Development Agency, with a total budget of US\$ 350,000. All equipment purchased and produced during the project's lifecycle would revert to ASAFE at the end of the project in June 2005. By December 2002 a group of eighty women had been selected for intensive training and assistance. ASAFE anticipated that the project would benefit only a fraction of its members, women entrepreneurs who were technically capable of producing for export. Notwithstanding Gisèle believed in the multiplier effect such programs can have. She insisted that these women would pave the way for a more general acceptance of e-based international trade, and benefit other small entrepreneurs as well at a later stage.

Building Relationships with Domestic Decision-Makers

The delay in setting up ASAFE's wireless connection, and the late involvement of the national government and industry in the IT sector reminded Gisèle of the importance of getting the right topics on the domestic agenda in a timely fashion. It was time to give up her longstanding policy of maximizing independence from the government. Unlike previous projects, the advancement of e-commerce could not succeed in isolation from the government's and other NGOs' projects, and public policy more generally. Without the right set of incentives and a functioning infrastructure in banking, mail, telecommunications and education, e-commerce would remain an abstract concept. Several infrastructure projects had been started with the help of the World Bank. Now it was important to complete them.

Gisèle joined the Chamber of Commerce in Cameroon, as interaction with other business leaders and state representatives on a regular basis was critical to remain apprised of new developments. In 2002, the government appointed Gisèle as a member of the National Commission on Private Higher Education. Consisting of 20 members (only two women), the Commission provided a platform to persuade people of the necessity of investment into IT. In November 2002, the Minister of Post and Telecommunications, accompanied by the Governor of the Littoral Province, which covers Douala, the general manager of Camtel and other dignitaries paid a visit to ASAFE. In January 2003, Gisèle was appointed to a government task force on human capital development in the private sector. As emphasized by a recognized consultant to international NGOs in Yaoundé, such close collaboration with the government would have been suspicious under normal circumstances. "But ASAFE has such a reputation for reliability and transparency that Gisèle can dare taking this step," he suggested.

E-Competence for African Women

In addition to working on e-readiness for cross-border trade in the short and medium term with ITC, Gisèle agreed with the Japanese government and Networked Intelligence for Development to implement a project in 2003 that would tackle long-term e-readiness, focusing again on access for women. Bringing a broader target group of women and youth in contact with information technology, the project was called developing e-competence among African women for the local and international markets [see **Exhibit 7**].

To foster e-competency and e-capability building in the region, ASAFE would create additional training programs for two target groups: women who had left school early, and unemployed graduates from the national universities' faculty of sciences. Such programs would create the capabilities responsive to the sophisticated needs of a digital economy, and train a workforce for the global data entry and low-skilled e-services market.

ASAFE designed work streams to focus on three types of needs:

- First, ongoing capacity building in software and hardware use aimed at enhancing previous training activities such as ASAFE’s general IT courses, C-Tech training, and the Cisco curriculum. In addition, this work stream aimed at entering a process of knowledge exchange with Asian enterprises.
- Second, improvement on the employment prospects of graduates, which required teaching additional IT courses that imparted skills and knowledge adapted to the specific IT needs on the Cameroonian formal-sector job market. ASAFE sought to build incentives and scalability into the program, e.g. by offering free additional training to its best students, and by training trainers at sister institutions.
- Finally, lobbying for public policies addressing the needs of women entrepreneurs. This entailed inviting government officials to see what ASAFE was doing, and providing training events for government officials on a number of key topics identified by the ITU, such as ensuring affordable access, pricing, trade policy, licensing issues, equitable access to training opportunities and supporting women as technology innovators.

Over a period of twelve months, US\$ 347,000 would be spent on the project. The Japanese government contributed US\$ 289,000, to be spent on hardware and software [see **Exhibit 8**]. NID contributed US\$ 35,000 in advice and training, and ASAFE US\$ 50,000. Two training programs—the training of workforce and women entrepreneurs—were designed to be self-financing.

The GYHosting Project

The joint ASAFE-ITC e-readiness plan for the cohort of eighty women entrepreneurs had originally aimed at strategically positioning the products and companies of these women on important search engines and portal sites. But no portal site existed to promote a specific Cameroonian industry or service sector. Most companies in Cameroon’s service industry, presumably the leading force in national IT development, did not even have an Internet site. In November 2002, Gisèle contacted GYHosting, an American company that specialized in selling domain names, web hosting services, and leasing server capacity.

In January 2003, a new project was up and running. In collaboration with GYHosting, ASAFE began to offer GYHosting’s service portfolio to Cameroonian companies. An important element of the value proposition was the location of the dedicated server in San Jose, California that did not suffer the electricity cuts routinely paralyzing Cameroon’s economy. ASAFE also offered links to a portal site, providing local business people opportunities to link to other sites. ASAFE decided to charge for all services except the links. Over time, ASAFE planned to create service portals for the following constituencies: Villages, hotels, associations, libraries, universities, pharmacies, travel agencies, doctors, accountants, and lawyers.

In the long run, Gisèle wanted to provide IT services abroad. “We have so many well educated, young people who are unemployed here. We could offer services offshore,” she argued. It would have been unrealistic to attempt to compete with Indian or Bangladeshi offshore service providers—labor cost was simply too high in Cameroon. But Cameroon is bilingual. So far, only Tunisia had begun to provide offshore services to the French-speaking market. The European market for offshore services was far from being saturated. Gisèle was convinced that many lessons could be learned from the Asian pioneers of offshore services. She was looking forward to visiting offshore service companies in Bangalore as soon as possible, as agreed with Datamation.

Looking Ahead

As Gisèle went over ASAFE’s history, she was struck once again by how fortunate she had been to assemble such a team of restless and well-educated individuals [see **Exhibit 9**]. Together, they had successfully addressed many challenges. ASAFE was well known in the national and international development community. Its very existence gave hope to hardened expatriate development workers in the field, disillusioned by the omnipresence of corruption in Africa. Expectations ran high. As an attaché at a major embassy put it, “only

half a per cent of the local NGOs are reliable and transparent. Combine that with their expertise and a fifteen-year track record, and you will agree that ASAFE is unique.”

In fact, it seemed that ASAFE’s reliability and transparency almost had international donors chasing the organization to secure its involvement in a diverse array of activities. Balancing donors’ needs and sticking to one’s mission was not always easy. For Gisèle’s husband, ASAFE was best advised to stick to its core competencies and not run after the funds. Gisèle agreed: “If you constantly keep going where the money is, you will never become an expert.” Nevertheless, ASAFE had entered new fields three times in a decade, always driven by the importance of its constituency’s newly arising needs. Clearly, a lot remained to be done to promote large-scale e-readiness. And had the time come to take ASAFE’s proven track record on education into the domain of public health and accept the funds for an HIV/AIDS project? Gisèle found herself looking forward to lively discussion at this week’s Board meeting, and wondered what points her team would put forward on ASAFE’s mission, expansion, and donor relations.

Exhibit 1: Cameroon's Socio-Economic Background

French-ruled Cameroon became independent on January 1, 1960. The southern part of British-ruled Cameroon joined the Republic of Cameroon in a referendum on October 1, 1961, whereas the northern part voted to join Nigeria. From 1960-1982, Cameroon's first president, Ahmadou Ahidjo, ruled the country in an authoritarian manner but took a consensus-oriented approach to ethnic relations. The country enjoyed political stability and strong economic growth. Erroneously assuming that he would die soon, Ahidjo unexpectedly handed over power to Prime Minister Paul Biya in 1982.

Roughly 200 ethnic groups live in Cameroon. Ahidjo mandated ethnic balance in civil service and private sector decisionmaking bodies. Abolishing these regulations, Biya consolidated his power by developing an extensive network favoring the country's eastern French-speaking population. In Cameroon, ethnic networks are especially strong in business.

Cameroon's economy underwent a major structural change after it began exporting oil in 1978. Annual real GDP growth averaged over seven per cent from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s. But the oil boom failed to benefit other sectors. In the early 1980s, Cameroon's economic performance began to deteriorate. A drought in 1982 and the closing of the Nigerian border, in an attempt to prevent smuggling and import of illegal foreign exchange, worsened the situation. Cameroon's real GDP posted negative growth in 1986-1993, contracting by an average of five per cent annually. To be granted new loans, Cameroon had no choice but to accept the IMF's restructuring plans in 1987. This meant reducing government spending, cutting jobs in the public sector, privatization and more effective import controls. Unemployment and inflation rose, leading to nationwide protests.

At the end of 1990, President Biya changed the constitution and introduced a multiparty system. 35 of 69 registered parties boycotted the 1992 election. Biya's ruling RDPC party nevertheless failed to gain a majority of votes, and entered a coalition.

Since the end of the oil boom, Cameroon has fallen behind in terms of education. In 1980, the official school enrolment rate was at 100 per cent. By 1988, it had fallen to 85 per cent, and in 2001 to 78 per cent. The official unemployment rate for academics was at 32 per cent in 2001 (and the overall unemployment rate at 41 per cent). In 2003, the real unemployment rate was probably in the 60-70 per cent range.

In 2003, Cameroon's physical infrastructure was very poor. Corruption and the government's indebtedness made it difficult to carry out infrastructure investments. In the telecommunications sector, people reacted by moving toward mobile telephony. The number of mobile telephone subscribers rose from less than 5,000 in 1999 to 600,000 in 2002. In 2003, the national fixed-line operator, Cameroon Telecommunications (Camtel) that held the monopoly in fixed-line telephony, had 95,000 mobile phone subscribers and operated 134,000 fixed telephone lines. About 280,000 people were on the waiting list for phone lines. Waiting for over a year was common. Nevertheless, Cameroon was connected to the transcontinental fiber optic network.

In 1997 Camtel's fixed line was connected to the Internet. Camtel was the main provider, but private sector participants challenged its position. In 2003, there were 13 Internet service providers. Internet connectivity was limited to Douala and Yaoundé, and frequent power cuts made it difficult to access the Internet on a continuous basis. The narrow bandwidth available for accessing the Internet made access slow and costly.

Exhibit 2: ASAFE Staff Biographies, 2003

Gisèle Yitamben

Founder and Director of ASAFE. Over 18 years of development work. Gisèle led numerous studies and task forces on democratization, leadership and women's rights. Member of the World Economic Forum's (WEF) Global Digital Divide Initiative. Member of the Global Advisory Committee set up by the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) in 2002 and Vice President since May 2003. Named an Outstanding Social Entrepreneur for the year 2002 by the Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship. 2002 World Technology Awards finalist and fellow of the World Technology Network.

Jean-Paul Yitamben

Joined ASAFE in 1996 as Director of Projects. Responsible for project development, coordination, evaluation, and human resources. Served as a senior economist in the state government, where he focused on assistance to small and medium enterprises, especially in the textile, food processing, agro-industry, and metallic wrapping sector.

Afor Loveline Tangwan

Personal assistant to Gisèle and responsible for project management and finance. Trained in Women and Gender Studies, Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Buea (Cameroon).

Gilbert Kouotang

ASAFE's accountant. Bachelor in finance from the University of Yaoundé, and many years of work experience in Cameroon's public sector as Credit Union General Supervisor, prior to joining ASAFE in 1989.

François Moumbe Woundjie

Director of the IT training center "ASAFE Knowledge Academy for Development," coordinator of the Pearson VUE testing center, and main Cisco instructor. Holds a Master's degree in physics from the University of Yaoundé. Taught IT in a private school in Douala before joining ASAFE in 2000.

Natacha Kingi Ndjouka

Heads management education and trains students in the use of information technology for office management. Bachelor's in marketing from the University of Yaoundé.

Désirée Mirabelle Djuine Soh

Heads IT education programs and works as a Cisco instructor. Focuses on e-commerce, and is in charge of software development. Leads the GYHosting project.

Odile Mantsogang

Heads the microfinance program. Taught in a public school prior to joining ASAFE in 1992 as an extension worker.

Joseph Engoue

Twenty years of experience as a private consultant to medium and large enterprises. Holds an MBA from the University of Yaoundé. Has excellent relations with Cameroon's private sector. Hired in 2003 to create one of the modules of the E-competence for African Women project.

Exhibit 3: Select Economic Indicators, Cameroon 1984-2003

Year	GDP (1)	Exchange Rate (2)	Consumer Price Index (3)	Exports (4)
1984	20597	437	47.3	1589
1985	22960	449	50.3	1626
1986	25054	346	55.7	2077
1987	25253	301	61.9	1689
1988	24069	298	65.4	1841
1989	24531	319	66.0	1854
1990	23931	272	65.0	2125
1991	23857	282	66.7	1958
1992	23680	265	69.4	1934
1993	23472	283	66.8	1508
1994	23362	555	75.2	1454
1995	24659	499	96.5	1736
1996	26394	512	100.0	1720
1997	28280	584	104.1	2004
1998	30071	590	108.1	1895
1999	31844	616	111.5	1713
2000	33879	712	110.0	1992
2001	35157	733	111.4	2128
2002	37179	697	116.4	1926
2003	39334	588	121.0	2037

Notes:

- (1) Real gross domestic product (GDP) at purchasing power parity (PPP) in million US\$ (Source: IMF International Financial Statistics). Estimates for 2002 and 2003.
- (2) Franc CFA per US\$, period average (Source: IMF International Financial Statistics). Estimate for 2003.
- (3) Consumer price index, rebased to 1996=100 (Source: EIU CountryData). Estimate for 2003.
- (4) Exports of goods, free-on-board (fob), in million US\$ (Source: IMF International Financial Statistics). Estimate for 2003.

Exhibit 4: Internet Access in Cameroon

The country's Internet environment set limits on the scope of ASAFE's projects. Fixed line penetration and connectivity were poor. Problems with the installation of wireless connections abounded. Internet provider fees and the cost of hardware strangled local users. In 2000, Camtel charged an hourly rate of 3,000 Francs CFA for Internet access. For most people, it was difficult to afford hardware—a personal computer cost at least one million Francs CFA. The liberalization of the provider market in 2001 put some downward pressure on prices. New entrants charged 200-300 Francs CFA per hour for Internet access. Camtel lowered its price to 2,000 Francs CFA an hour. As the fees fell, Internet cafés began to mushroom. Second-hand desktops from Europe and Asia capable of connecting to the Internet swept the market for the first time. They were sold at less than 50,000 Francs CFA. In 2001, falling costs put the Internet within reach of ordinary people for the first time. Infrastructure problems nevertheless persisted and undercut the dissemination of IT and e-commerce. Electricity continued to be cut several times a day. AES, the American energy company, had taken over SONEL, the national electricity provider, in 2000. AES was not willing to make investments in the decrepit infrastructure unless rates were adjusted. User charges were set to rise by 7.65 per cent annually over the next four years.

Ultimately, winning people's acceptance would be key to the effective use of ICTs. People were very skeptical about the security of the Internet. For centuries, indigenous knowledge in Africa had been disseminated orally. The Internet suddenly required that knowledge be transmitted exclusively in a written form. Without the government and large business firms assuming a leadership role, building trust was bound to be a lengthy process. Large companies used the Internet and e-mail, but they had not introduced e-commerce, neither at the business-to-business nor the business-to-consumer level. Few government agencies and companies had Internet sites at all. No one had bothered to set up a portal site. While the government had launched a project to boost IT in 2002, a year later it had not yet become operational.

Exhibit 5: The World Bank's Efforts to Foster E-Commerce in Africa

E-commerce transactions were contingent on a whole additional set of infrastructure and acceptance requirements. To carry out B2B and B2C transactions online, both parties had to have bank accounts abroad. Before 2002, Cameroonian banks had neither introduced card payment systems, nor set up a system to handle inter-bank transactions. To develop modern electronic payment instruments, and to reduce the time required for clearing and settlement, the World Bank had approved a US\$ 11 million payment system project for the Economic and Monetary Community of Central Africa (CEMAC) in November 2002. Scheduled for completion by the end of 2003, the project would put in place the three most important infrastructure requirements for e-commerce:

- A pilot scheme based on electronic money and pre-paid smart cards for small payments to be made by households, including the automatic pre-payment of utility services.
- An inter-bank card system to develop electronic transactions on a regional basis and reduce the use of costly and unsecured cash or paper-based payment instruments.
- The improvement of the clearing and settlement of low-value transactions, such as checks and letters of exchange.

Exhibit 6: Measuring E-Readiness

E-Readiness can be defined as the degree to which a community is prepared to participate in the networked world. It is measured as advancement in the areas that are most critical for information and communication technology (ICT). Typically, communities will not be uniformly ready across all evaluation criteria, and may be well positioned for some applications of ICTs, but unable to use others. The value of assessing its e-readiness lies in evaluating a community's unique opportunities and challenges.

Under the guidance of Jeffrey Sachs, the Center for International Development's Information Technologies Group developed an e-readiness guide (Sachs and Information Technologies Group 2000). It proposes 19 criteria to help to measure a community's e-readiness, which are clustered in five main fields:

- 1) **Network access** deals with the availability, costs and quality of ICT networks, services and equipment:
 - Network speed and quality
 - Hardware and software
 - Service and support
 - Information infrastructure
 - Internet availability
 - Internet affordability
- 2) **Networked learning** asks how the national educational system integrates ICTs. Are there technical training programs to prepare an ICT workforce? Networked learning can be measured as:
 - Schools' access to ICTs
 - Enhancing education with ICTs
 - Developing the ICT workforce
- 3) **Networked society** examines the extent to which individuals use ICTs at work and in their personal lives, and if there are significant opportunities available for those with ICT skills. To assess the status, examine:
 - People and organizations online
 - Locally relevant content
 - ICTs in everyday life
 - ICTs in the workplace
- 4) **Networked economy** assesses how businesses and governments use ICTs to interact with the public and with each other:
 - ICT employment opportunities
 - B2C e-commerce
 - B2B e-commerce
 - E-government
- 5) **Networked policy** asks to which extent the policy environment promotes or hinders the growth of ICT adoption and use. Relevant fields are:
 - Telecommunications regulation
 - ICT trade policy

Exhibit 7: “E-Competence for African Women and Youth“ Project, 2002, Detailed Budget

Activities / Requirements	ASAFE	NID	JWID F
1) Training modules			
a. IT Training			
➤ acquisition of training modules			
Ctech			70.000 US\$
Oracle			15.000 US\$
Web design & management			10.000 US\$
Others modules(programming, java)			10.000 US\$
➤ Portable IT training package developed (IT consultant)			
➤ Training of trainers 15 trainers for 10 days)			6.000 US\$
➤ Training of the workforce	Income		5.000 US\$
b. Training on management and business skills (management, e-commerce, e-marketing, e-financing, export e-services)			
➤ Development of training modules	37.000 US\$		
➤ Training of trainers (50)	13.000 US\$		
➤ Training of women entrepreneurs	Income		
2) Placement cell			
➤ Consultant to evaluate Cameroon E-readiness and human resources needs. Consultant junior (2 workings months)			5.000 US\$
➤ Lodging of the programme. ASAFE contribution evaluated at 2.000 US\$			5.600 US\$
➤ 2 persons recruited 400 x 2 x 12			9.600 US\$
➤ 2 computers and printer for office works			

Exhibit 8: Application Form for Grant Assistance, Embassy of Japan

In 2003, local organizations were asked to fill in a form containing the following questions to apply for a grant from the Japanese Embassy in Cameroon:

1. Beneficiary organization

- 1.1 Name of the organization
- 1.2 Address of the organization
- 1.3 Year of the establishment and legalization
- 1.4 Type of organization
- 1.5 Goal of the organization
- 1.6 Areas of intervention (*agriculture, vocational training, women and development, education, health*)
- 1.7 Person responsible of the organization
- 1.8 Contact person
- 1.9 Composition and qualification of the management team
- 1.10 Present financial management system
- 1.11 Main activities
- 1.12 Development project already realized by the organization
- 1.13 Give the names of three individual or legal entities who know your organization, that we can contact

2 Project

- 2.1 Title of the project
- 2.2 Sector
- 2.3 Project site
- 2.4 Brief outline of the project
- 2.5 Realizations to be done with Japanese grant (details of realization, amounts)
- 2.6 Estimated cost of the entire project:
 - 2.6.1 *Value of investments already made,*
 - 2.6.2 *Contribution of the organization,*
 - 2.6.3 *Contribution of beneficiary populations,*
 - 2.6.4 *Financial assistance expected from the Embassy of Japan,*
 - 2.6.5 *Financial assistance expected from other donors,*
 - 2.6.6 *Total cost of the project*
- 2.7 Target group
 - 2.7.1 *Qualitative and quantitative detailed description of the population to be reached,*
 - 2.7.2 *Estimated population that would benefit from the project*
- 2.8 Expected effects of the project on the target group
- 2.9 Description of the planning and duration of various phases of the project
 - 2.9.1 *Timing and duration of each phase*
- 2.10 Financial management system
- 2.11 Are you planning to implicate the target groups in the implementation of the project?
- 2.12 Mechanism in place to sustain the project

Please attach, if available the following documents and information to this application form

- Any document presenting the organization;
- The official document which legalizes the organization;
- Statute and internal regulation of beneficiary organization;
- Detailed list of the management team;
- Detailed budget of the project;
- Plan of constructions;
- Pro-forma invoices delivered by three different suppliers;
- A map showing the project site;
- A feasibility study of the project (if available);
- Photos of existing accomplishments and realizations;

- Any other document describing the organization and the project

Exhibit 9: Key Moment in ASAFE's History

- **1987** Gisèle Yitamben decides to create an organization to support women in their self-employment process. Cameroon's legal context requires that a formal application be filed with the local authorities. The proposal for the creation of *Association pour le Soutien et l'Appui à la Femme Entrepreneur* (ASAFE) is rejected on the grounds that it lacks a multi-ethnic board.
- **1989** Gisèle puts together a multi-ethnic board and succeeds in founding ASAFE. Its first program focuses on business education.
- **1990** The law treating freedom of association tentatively authorizes NGOs under certain conditions. For example, NGOs are not permitted to raise money in addition to contributions from its members.
- **1993** ASAFE adds microfinance to its portfolio.
- **1994** Gisèle conducts a study on urban poverty for the World Bank. The study attracts substantial international attention. The scope and quality of Gisèle's international network makes a quantum leap. For her contribution to the advancement of the status of women in Africa, Gisèle Yitamben receives the Theresa Hoover award from the Global Ministries Women's Division (USA).
- **1996** ASAFE launches its daily savings program, Alaji.
- **1996** Gisèle wins an award from the Comité de l'Excellence Africaine for her contribution to the socioeconomic advancement of the underprivileged in Cameroon. One of the World Bank's managing directors visits the old ASAFE headquarters in Douala.
- **1997** ASAFE launches a new microfinance program to target individual entrepreneurs in the 12-100 employee range that traditional financial institutions are unwilling to support.
- **1998** Beginning of the partnership between NID and ASAFE. The Ambassador of Japan agrees to contribute substantially to the construction of ASAFE's four-story resource center.
- **1999** ASAFE decides to promote e-commerce as a tool of generating new business opportunities and organizes the first Cyber Forum in Douala. ASAFE begins collaborating with ITU, which provides ASAFE's internal IT infrastructure.
- **2001** The Schwab Foundation for Social Entrepreneurship in Geneva, Switzerland, names Gisèle an "Outstanding Social Entrepreneur" for 2002.
- **2002** ASAFE reassesses its e-commerce activities and decides to cooperate more closely with domestic actors to promote e-readiness. The Minister of Post and Telecommunication visits ASAFE. The Cisco Networking Academy Program grants ASAFE the "Highest Academy Female Enrollment Award" for 2002. Gisèle is a finalist for the 2002 World Technology Awards and fellow of the World Technology Network.
- **2003** The Cameroonian government appoints Gisèle to its task force on human development issues in the private sector. Gisèle also becomes a member of the Chamber of Commerce in Douala. Cisco nominates an ASAFE member and graduate from the joint ASAFE/Cisco Networking Academy as its networking academy manager for the Central Africa region. Gisèle is elected Vice President of the UNIFEM Digital Divide Committee in Kampala, Uganda.

Suggestions for Further Reading

- Economist Intelligence Unit. 2003. *Country Profile—Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, 2002*. London: Economist Intelligence Unit. <<http://www.eiu.com/>>
- International Monetary Fund. 2002. Cameroon: 2002 Article IV Consultation, Third Review Under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility; and Request for a Waiver of Performance Criterion—Staff Report; News Brief and Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion; and Statement by the Executive Director for Cameroon. *IMF Country Report, 02/258*. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund. <<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2002/cr02258.pdf>>
- International Monetary Fund. 2003. *International Financial Statistics*. Washington, D.C.: International Monetary Fund. <<http://www.ifs.apdi.net/logon.aspx>>
- Sachs, Jeffrey, and Information Technologies Group. 2000. *Readiness for the Networked World: A Guide for Developing Countries*. Cambridge, Mass.: Center for International Development at Harvard University. <<http://cyber.law.harvard.edu/readinessguide/>>
- World Bank. 2001. A Chance to Learn: Knowledge and Finance for Education in Sub-Saharan Africa. *Working Paper, 22005*. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. <http://www.wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSPContentServer/WDSP/IB/2001/04/24/000094946_01032905304794/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf>