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OPTIONS FOR PROMOTING USER-BASED GOVERNANCE
OF SAHELIAN RENEWABLE NATURAL RESOURCES

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SUMMARY

by

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OPTIONS FOR PROMOTING USER-BASED GOVERNANCE OF SAHELIAN RENEWABLE NATURAL RESOURCES

James T. Thomson et al, summary by L. Bossard

The institutions that currently govern renewable natural resource management in the Sahel are inadequate..."

The term institution is taken here to mean a set of rules, and not systematically a formal organization. In the Sahel today, a large number of institutions are in a position to contribute to the management of resources at all levels and on all scales. The main institutions are the family, village associations and authorities, local administrations (cantons, arrondissements, etc.), legal codes, rural development, finance and interior ministries, NGOs and donors.

The inadequacy of current resource management policies - characterized by the lack of recognition of local jurisdictions and powers, and by the difficulty experienced by those local powers in mobilizing the finance they need to manage their resources - is largely responsible for the relative inertia of Sahelian societies in the face of environmental degradation.

The apparent uniformity of the Sahel actually conceals an extraordinary and highly complex pastiche of micro-environments, which can only really be managed and preserved if everybody that lives in them behaves in an autonomous and responsible fashion. On the basis of this statement, the authors stress a number of fundamental facts:

- Natural resources can be divided into various categories on the basis of exclusion (i.e., the extent to which it is technically feasible to deny access to potential users), and mode of consumption (i.e., whether the resource is consumed in a joint and non-rivalrous manner, or whether consumption is separable and rivalrous).
- Private goods are resources that are subject to exclusion and separate or rivalrous consumption. Arable soils, for example, are considered private goods in many Sahelian rainfed agricultural systems.
- Private goods with externalities, such as water harvesting installations on uphill fields, may have positive effects on downhill holders (reduced threat of erosion), but they may also have negative effects (preventing water from moving downhill during droughts).

- Open access resources, such as grazing land around public boreholes, is open to anyone and everyone, and consumption is separable or competitive.
- Common pool resources are similar to open access resources, except that they are subject to easy exclusion (e.g., shallow aquifers in valley bottoms, where those that hold rights in the valley can get access to the water and use it until the supply is gone).
- Public goods and resources are not easily subject to exclusion. Better air quality, for example, is freely available to all those in the area, and consumption by one person does not potentially or actually interfere with consumption by others.
- Resource management needs rules and authorities (to govern access, etc.) Rules must be flexible and must evolve pragmatically.

THE NEED FOR DECENTRALIZATION

In view of this complexity, the need for real decentralization becomes considerably clearer, and decentralization must rely on resource-specific institutions that can alter management rules in line with the specific resource situation. These institutions must be able to settle disputes between users, and must have the wherewithal to ensure that the resources themselves continue to exist and that management is sustained.

Although it is clear that private goods can only be managed correctly by the basic production unit (on condition that property rights are recognized), there is a need to protect these goods (police) and to resolve any conflicts that may arise (law). Similarly, collective resources must be managed by a collective organization whose authority is freely recognized. That authority will establish rules, and ensure those rules are respected and that resource availability continues. For open access resources, public institutions must prevent attempts by certain parties to keep the resources for their own exclusive use, and must take steps to avoid degradation caused by over-exploitation. In a word, central government cannot avoid promoting private initiative and local government, provided that such promotion is backed by national policies and by appropriate legal and jurisdictional frameworks.

Further, local institutions must fit the type and extent of the resources to be managed, and there is thus a need to review the basic principles of village institutions, which currently cover too many different types of activities. This should ease and accelerate the process of developing concerted approaches, defining common interests, and resolving conflicts.

RESPONSIBLE INSTITUTIONS

No collective organization can function correctly if it does not establish its own rules as part of a global policy that respects the resources that fall outside its area of competence. This autonomy not only promotes individual consciousness, but also makes it possible to solve most conflicts internally and quickly without needing to turn to formal institutions.

Nevertheless, legal and administrative authorities must always be in a position to intervene at the request of the local institution if the latter cannot establish the ground rules and ensure they are applied and respected.

INSTITUTIONS WITH SUFFICIENT FINANCIAL RESOURCES

The current state of land-tenure legislation and the fact that insufficient power has been placed in the hands of local communities, these communities cannot use savings and taxes to mobilize the capital needed to set up and implement large-scale natural resource management programs.

In most cases, capital must be brought in from outside, not only to cover basic investments, but also to provide the physical means of management. The problem of recurrent costs has purely financial aspects (how to mobilize the funds that are needed) as well as management-related aspects (how to optimize management of the resource in question). Guaranteed exclusivity of access to a resource by a given group of users (supervision, fences, etc.) is the best incentive for members of that group to participate in management and upkeep costs.

Once this has been established, a joint undertaking can be financed in a number of ways, such as local taxes, work in a collective field (where profits would cover all or part of the operating costs), etc.

Aside from the current difficulties in setting up this type of system (centralization and absence of official local taxes), one major problem remains: paying for access to a resource does not restrict the use of that resource once contributions have been paid. In other words, the "unit price" should reflect both the quantities consumed (and this is very difficult to measure) and the cost of reconstituting the resource once it has been depleted (marginal cost + external cost).

STRATEGY FOR THE FUTURE

Decentralization and the responsibility of rural organizations are not yet part of the real situation. Nevertheless, initiative has been taken spontaneously at the local level for

some time now, and donors have started to change their attitudes and are now exerting pressure on governments to bring changes in the legal, organizational and financial frameworks governing natural resource management.

Today, the decentralization process is still in its early stages, and involves more delegation than real devolution of responsibility. It is now urgent to promote the institutionalization of the transfer of authority to the local level:

- transferring the right of ownership of natural resources to the local users;
- transferring the power to establish management rules to local institutions, which are the only actors in a position to make the rules fit the local context;
- transferring dispute-resolution power to local institutions;
- transferring the power to levy taxes and contributions to the same local institutions.