

Natural resource management by village councils: Some evidence from Burkina Faso.

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In the latter half of the 1980's a national programme for land management (Programme National de Gestion des Terroirs) was developed in Burkina Faso. The background was a period of relative drought beginning in the 1970's and culminating in 1984-85; strong internal migration following the eradication of riverblindness in large parts of the country; an increasing pressure on land by people and animals; a more or less breakdown of traditional natural resource management practices; and an inability of the state to carry out efficient natural resource management.

The national programme of land management (PNGT) aimed at re-introducing natural resource management (NRM) and counter-acting the processes of degradation and environmental deterioration. Briefly, the programme can be characterized by the following features:

- It is the ambition to decentralize NRM to the village level. The villagers are expected to manage local natural resources in collaboration with technicians from the relevant ministries. Thus, the idea is to make the villagers responsible for the use and the preservation of local natural resources.
- Village lands should be delimited and divided into zones according to their use. In order to create an awareness of scarce resources the programme proposes to establish clear borderlines between villages so that the area which is the responsibility of a particular village is well-defined. Moreover, this area should be divided into different zones typically used for agriculture, pastoralism or lying fallow.
- In each village a council with representatives of all social and economic groups should be established. The council is expected to decide upon and carry out activities in relation to NRM. It is also expected to resolve conflicts concerning the use of natural

resources, but it is not meant to be a forum for political discussions in general. Furthermore, a contract between the village and the state concerning NRM activities is envisaged. This contract should specify the obligations of each party.

Within the frame of PNGT eight pilot projects were carried out from 1986/87 to 1989/91. The projects were financed by different donors and, accordingly, differed somewhat regarding their approach to the matter. Despite shortcomings and mixed results, the overall conclusion based on the experience of the pilot projects has been that the PNGT expresses a fruitful approach to NRM. While the objectives of the programme are very broad¹ the general feeling among officials and donors is that the programme contributes

- to developing an awareness of the need to protect and manage natural resources,
- to initiating and organizing specific NRM activities, and
- to controlling and organizing the strong internal migration in Burkina Faso.

Thus, the programme is now slowly entering a not very well-defined post-pilot phase where an increasing number of projects covering most parts of the country are adopting the approach. Yet, for the time being, the programme has reached no more than approximately 150 villages out of perhaps 7000 villages in Burkina Faso. It is worth noting that village councils exist only in a minor part of these 150 villages and that councils normally are created on the initiative of a project.

The PNGT is carried out within the framework of a centralized state administration. The territory is divided into 30 provinces and approximately 250 departments with perhaps 30.000 inhabitants on an

¹ The objectives of the programme include

- to contribute to the organization of the rural population in order to facilitate the application of the approach;
- to change the present use of natural resources in order to create a better management of environmental resources;
- to secure tenant rights in order to stimulate the development of productive activities of agriculturalists and pastoralists;
- to slow down the process of ecological degradation and to restore the productive potential of the renewable natural resources;
- to control and manage internal migrations; and
- to intensify and integrate agriculture and pastoralism.

(See Cellule de Coordination du P.N.G.T.V. 1989. *Rapport de synthèse et d'analyse des expériences pilotes de gestion des terroirs villageois*. Ministère du Plan et de la Coopération, Ouagadougou; p. 4).

average. Both levels are led by an administrative officer (an "haut-commissaire" and a prefect, respectively) with minimal and very indirect popular participation. The villages are recognized as administrative entities which until recently have been led by a revolutionary council. After the adoption of the new constitution in 1991 the revolutionary councils have been abolished, and it is now unclear how the villages are going to be governed. Thus, for the time being, the councils for NRM are the only public fora in the villages covered by the PNGT.

It should be emphasized that this extremely short introduction to the PNGT and its context seeks to reflect the commonly held views on the background and the development of the programme. It is, however, possible to question many of the assumptions and achievements of the programme as will be done to some extent in the following discussion. The point is to raise some problems related to NRM by village councils and discuss them in their specific context in Burkina Faso. Accordingly, theoretical inferences are for the most part omitted. The issues discussed relate to appropriate levels for conducting NRM, the political and administrative environment of village councils, local traditional ways of decision-making, and the villagers' general aspirations and difficulties. Finally, I make a few comments on the question of NRM from an institutional perspective.

NRM at different levels

The PNGT focuses on the village level as the main level for undertaking NRM. Within its boundaries, the village is expected to be in charge of the management of land, water, trees, and pastures. Thus, it is expected that the village constitutes the most appropriate social entity as well as geographical area for conducting NRM. While this might be true, there are a number of problems attached to NRM at the village level. These problems relate to the discrepancy between this level of resource *management* and the levels of resource *use*.

In most villages in Burkina Faso agriculture is mixed with pastoralism. Apart from cultivating the land many farmers breed sheep,

goats or cattle and depending on the season may have to take their animals far away from the village in order to find water and pastures. Moreover, some pastoralists travel round the country with their animals on a more permanent basis. Thus, the grazing of the animals is not confined to the pastures of a single village. Herdsmen and animals drift around and across village boundaries rendering management of pastures at the village level difficult.

Some village councils try to fine people who let their animals graze in the fields or in the zones reserved for agriculture, plantation or fallow. This system usually works when the offender comes from the village, but it is very difficult to exercise as regards strangers. They seldom feel committed to local rules or accept village councils as legitimate bodies for making decisions and solving conflicts. Thus, the councils will have to call the prefect, and even if he agrees to assist, the offender has had plenty of time to disappear into the bush.

From the pastoralists' point of view local rules might seem a bit arbitrary or directly obstructive. Typically, the pastoralists drive their cattle along certain tracks. If some strange village suddenly decides to block such a track by creating a fallow zone in which animals are forbidden, the pastoralists are not likely to accept the decision. Therefore, in a sense, NRM by village councils must take into account the pastoral use of the larger area of which the villages are a part.

In a few areas (Ganzourgou and Bougouriba) ten to fifteen villages have formed an area council with members from each village council. These area councils try to solve conflicts between the villages and they have in at least one case managed to establish grazing grounds with animal tracks in between. However, two problems remain. Normally, the pastoralists are not very well represented in the village or area councils. Thus, their influence is limited. Moreover, organizing pastoralism in a certain area might create difficulties in neighbouring areas in which access to pastures is not restricted. Therefore, managing grazing grounds and water for animals requires regional and possibly national planning.

Another question with implications for the preservation and management of natural resources concerns migration. Some village

councils try to prevent or restrict the settlement of migrants in their village. This is done in perfectly sound consideration of how many people a certain amount of land, water, and vegetation can sustain. Nevertheless, the policy is likely to create a similar pressure on neighbouring areas, as the above mentioned regulation of pastoralism. There is, accordingly, also a need for regional initiatives to control and regulate the settlement of migrants. This also exemplifies that factors like migration and policies stimulating migration which are not directly related to natural resources do have a significant bearing on their use.

Choosing the village level for NRM has in some instances produced unforeseen reactions by the villagers. Following the creation of different zones and the limited possibilities for acquiring new fields within the village people have tried to obtain land outside the boundaries of the village. This is sometimes done by clearing the land and then leaving it for future use because the one who clears the land has the usufruct right to it. Hence, land is left naked and vulnerable to erosion. Here the task is to avoid areas between villages being badly exploited and deteriorating.

So far the discussion has concerned the need for NRM at a geographically more comprehensive level in order to solve the problems rather than just pushing them outside the villages. In addition, one can ask whether there is a need for NRM at a geographically more limited level than the village level. There are two concerns. First, agriculture is organized more or less on a household basis and the village as such does not influence the way natural resources are used in the fields. Thus, management of natural resources used in relation to the process of cultivation is most likely to succeed if it is carried out by households. If the households have other preoccupations and do not regard NRM as an important matter, the activities at the village level will be of little significance.

Second, it is not evident that the village is always the most appropriate social entity for conducting NRM. Villages in Burkina Faso consist typically of a number of geographically dispersed neighbourhoods which differ from each other along ethnic and sometimes occupational lines. On the central plateau farming Mossi live side by side with cattle breeding Peulh but separated in different neighbourhoods. As cattle sometimes damage cultivated fields, the

relationship between Mossi and Peulh is somewhat troublesome. This might create a feeling of solidarity within the neighbourhood rather than within the village. Furthermore, different neighbourhoods are often created at different points in time, meaning that some neighbourhoods have access to better lands than others. Hence, the decisions taken and activities organized by a village council might not be considered as legitimate by one or more groups in the village.

The political and administrative environment

The PNGT expects village councils to carry out NRM with the support of officials from the technical and administrative services. However, the village council is not recognized as a legally responsible body within the administrative hierarchy of the state. As such the councils do not have the power to enforce their decisions and regulations. If the authority of the councils is challenged, they have to persuade the prefect in the department to support them. Moreover, their decisions can easily be overruled by prefects and technical servants. There are different examples of such an undermining of village councils' authority. When they need an official resolution of a question, pastoralists normally approach the prefect. They tend to regard village councils as farmer organizations. Likewise, some foresters sanction the cutting of trees by strangers despite local rules forbidding this.

Furthermore, all land in Burkina Faso is formally owned by the State. While the State exercises this right in extremely limited cases, the rule contributes to many peasants' basically sceptical attitude towards the State. Accordingly, in some areas the peasants are very reluctant to participate in the delimitation and division into zones of village lands. They fear that this forms part of an increasing state control of their lives.

This scepticism characterizes not only the villagers. Technicians and bureaucrats alike find it difficult to accept that they are expected to respond to locally expressed needs and desires. They often regard this inversion of normal procedures as unprofessional and undesir-

able. Thus, the general atmosphere between villagers and civil servants does not facilitate cooperation and preparation of the NRM plan. Another feature undermining the relationship between village councils and civil servants is the frequent replacements in the state administration. New prefects are not aware of old agreements which typically differ from village to village or they do not feel obliged by them.

Financially, the village councils are weak. They are not able to obtain credits due to their legally uncertain position. While some councils have managed to organize sales of crops from collectively cultivated fields or to collect small sums from the villagers, most councils are heavily dependent on external grants when they want to carry out major activities such as building rock lines, digging wells, or planting trees. In these cases their sole possibility is to approach the project working in the area. The PNGT approach is normally brought to an area by an externally financed aid project or in rare cases by local or international NGOs. As the State commands very limited resources, the village councils cannot obtain funds for their activities when the project withdraws typically after two to four years. This means, especially in the poor, dry regions of northern Burkina Faso, that the PNGT approach faces a bleak future. It is very unlikely that the villagers themselves will be able to finance major activities in the coming years.

Local processes of decision-making

By having representatives of different social and economic groups, the village councils embody a change from present forms of organization in the villages. The village groups ("groupements villageois") exist in nearly every village, but they usually organize people with more or less similar interests. Hence, there are village groups for women, for young farmers, for stock breeders, etc. In this sense it is new to bring people with various social and economic backgrounds "under the same tree" to discuss political subjects. Moreover, the village councils embark on handling issues which hitherto have been the exclusive concern of village and land chiefs. Distribution of land and resolution of many forms of conflicts are tasks which

traditionally have been the preserve of a few leaders. These tasks are increasingly, but still slowly, being taken over by the village councils.

It is, however, evident that the councils primarily function as a body for organizing concrete activities. Planting trees and building rock lines are two common activities while mediating conflicts or imposing fines on people who break the rules are much less widespread. In this way village councils tend to resemble village groups. Still, after having worked for some years, many councils become more active in relation to issues normally falling under the authority of traditional leaders. Thus, in the course of time, councils often enlarge their sphere of governance. This is of some importance in relation to NRM. In areas with strong immigration traditional leaders find it difficult to refuse migrants land. If a migrant observes the rules and norms and correctly approaches the local leader, it will be a considerable break with customary practices to deny him land. Village councils seem to be much less troubled by such practices. If they judge that there is no room for newcomers, they often try to persuade them to leave, if necessary with the help of the prefect.

In a similar way, the involvement of the women and the young in the political life of the villages influence the NRM. Women are much more concerned about the availability of firewood and water for the household than men, and the young seem to be more interested in new ways of using and managing natural resources. Nevertheless, there is a strong need for the continuing participation of traditional leaders as they assure the legitimacy of the councils. In at least one case the lack of such participation led to a breakdown of the council. For this reason, people often choose to be represented by old, respected villagers.

Village councils and local organizations might be seen as an instrument for carrying out NRM. This is, however, not the way they are regarded by the villagers. Most councils discuss other issues than those strictly related to NRM. Education and health are urgent topics, and the desire for initiatives in these areas is often greater than the felt need for NRM. Through the councils the villagers see a possibility for developing their village with respect to schools, health clinics, mills, etc. Thus, the villagers regard the councils as

instruments for development, in general. It implies, as well, that from the villagers' point of view, a strong *raison d'être* for the councils is their ability to attract funds. If the source, the project, leaves the area, the support for the councils might crumble away.

The idea behind the PNGT approach is that, on the basis of decentralized and democratized organizations, NRM will stand a better chance of succeeding. While this might be true, it is difficult to imagine local democratic development in a single sector. The approach necessarily implies a broader perspective. However, in Burkina Faso many donor agencies, including the World Bank, refrain from taking this broader perspective. They focus exclusively on the state of the environment and the need for action in this respect. Investments in schools, health clinics, etc. are to a certain extent avoided. This is a practice, I believe, that will undermine the approach itself. Locally induced and controlled development cannot be divided up into sectors. Thus, it is necessary to view NRM by village councils and local organizations as an integrated part of a general development process.

Concluding remarks on NRM from an institutional perspective

The term institution has at least two meanings. Some think of organizations and organizational structures when talking about institution-building or strengthening. Others refer to norms, rules and practices which guide the behaviour of individuals and groups. In the last sense of the term some remarks on NRM by local organizations can be made.

Existing local institutions for coping with environmental degradation seem to be inadequate in the present situation in Burkina Faso. In some places it is believed that the cutting of certain trees will harm the spirits, and such practices are, therefore, forbidden.² Apart from this type of rules, traditional NRM is normally delegated to a land chief ("chef de terre") who often administers the land with a view to income opportunities. Thus, neither comprehensive rules

² See Armelle Faure. 1992. *Perception de l'approche gestion des terroirs par les populations rurales au Burkina Faso*. Caisse Centrale de Coopération Économique, Ouagadougou.

nor concerned bodies exist in relation to NRM. On the contrary, there has, at least until recently, been a general feeling that land and pastures are not scarce resources. In the course of time, extensive forms of cultivation have been institutionalized. It is, therefore, reasonable to talk about institutional barriers to a more conscious NRM.

The villages in which aspects of the PNGT approach are applied seem to undergo some institutional changes. The increased tendency to deny newcomers land and the willingness to establish protected zones are examples of this. Yet, these changes must definitely be slow in order to gain local acceptance. Any attempt to change institutions rapidly, such as excluding traditional leaders from the village councils, is doomed to fail. On the other hand, there do exist institutions which facilitate the development of a more comprehensive NRM. The strong tradition for organizing local self-help groups and collective work supports the functioning of the village councils. The crux of the matter, in the villages, seems to be the ability of the councils to include all groups (the women, the young, the pastoralists) in the political discussions and to take over the mediating authority in relation to conflicts over natural resource use. Should such an institutional development take place the prospects for NRM by village councils are likely to be brighter.

A number of other institutional barriers have been mentioned in this brief paper: the strong centralistic tradition within the state administration, the lack of official recognition of the village councils, and the donors' preferences for short in-and-out projects. Apart from the project length, which some donors are considering prolonging there are no signs of changes in these institutional barriers. It seems that the national political commitment to the PNGT is somewhat lukewarm as recent decentralization initiatives have not acknowledged the village councils in any significant way. This could pose a serious problem for local NRM in the long run, and it emphasizes the importance of national policies in relation to local development.