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**GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION IN
DEVELOPMENT**

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PROBLEM OF GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITIES

"Grassroots participation" : from a slogan, the term has now become a creed. And what meaning it covers!

With the political decision-makers, popular participation in development appears first and foremost as a strategic objective. "Guarantee of national revolutionary democracy and national unity" in one country, participation is termed in another as "equivalent to political democracy".

These two quotations drawn from reports of Cape Verde and Niger could have found their equivalence in The Gambia or in Chad so much there exist abundant official literature on grassroots participation in development.

From one end of the Sahel to the other, even where the term - and political project - is not always explicit, "the preponderant role of the masses in conducting and achieving economic development" is henceforth part and parcel of strong convictions.

A strategic objective, participation is equally a welter of institutions and methods of approach. Planning system, administrative organisation, political system, mechanisms for approving projects, development support system, training system, etc..... are some of those institutions and methods which, on the common fund of the participationist hymn, would shape the landscape in a differential manner.

From one point to the other, the organs of the local administration power shall differentiate themselves, the political organisations also. From one country to other, the autonomous organisations, both formal and informal ones would evolve with institutional framework which are heterogenous just as those civic activities of a national interest are.

Because of the heterogeneity of these different variables, to which we must add the existence or otherwise and nature of support institutions to participation, because of the specific combinations that are formed between them, participation is going to take shape and have a distinct content. Now, when talk of participation in the Sahel, what do we mean?

Three types of participation are generally identified :

* A formal type of participation: this involves participating in an action for the purpose of executing a directive and in order not to be punished. Such participation which is done under duress has generally resistance thresholds and has practically no official lawyers.

* Participation by imitation: this type of participation which inspired the theories of "spreadingout" in the area of support to the rural world often encounters thresholds of lassitude. However it continues to have its advocates.

* Responsible participation: here one behaves like a voluntary actor and one commits oneself both mind and soul. Responsibility and freedom are the keywords of this latter approach which polls, as far as Sahelian discourse goes, the greatest number of votes.

"How can such responsible participation be aroused, be encouraged, be tolerated, be consolidated and lastly, be accepted?" This, in essence, is the question to which answers were sought in the experience and practice of a number of development projects and activities in Cape Verde, in The Gambia, in Niger and in Chad.

The identification of these projects, the planning of the activities that they include, the execution of these activities, their monitoring and evaluation are several analysis levels of the problem of participation.

* Cape Verde's report, P.4.

At these varying levels, the case studies are rich in contents : they reveal some factors constituting the background of the question of participation in the Sahel. It is these factors that we are going to present in the first place. The obstacles to grassroots participation shall be discussed in a second item. thirdly and lastly, a few major principles shall be raised with a view to promoting greater grassroots participation.

1. FACTORS OF PARTICIPATION

Whatever the variables selected as priority are, whatever the combinatory variations envisaged, and lastly, whatever specific social training may result, even if it remains at the level of political project, two factors dominate in evaluating popular participation in development projects in the Sahel.

1.1. The first factor is that the participative reflex is far from being acquired.

Inspite of the references dates to which decision-makers may claim they belong (these references date back, in several countries, to independence and are, as it were cosubstantial to it) grassroots participation has not yet formed part of the ways of developers who nonetheless heap praises on it. Today, in several projects, this participation appears as though limited in its impact. And doubly limited too!

A first limitation resides in its level of effectiveness in relation to the different cycles of the project raised earlier on.

Out of the 18 projects*studied in the four countries covered by the study, the project identification phase has not involved as it were, the grassroots.

Only three out of the 18 projects do not fall within the rule.

* See annexure for the list of projects studied and data concerning them.

They merely go to confirm the rule according to which this stage, so vital in the lifespan of any project, especially where the latter envisages in the short term, the transfer of responsibility to the populations, still remains a matter, if not the prerogative, of these technicians who are marked by a rationality that is not necessarily deeply rooted in the social reality in which the project is going to fit.

These observations are equally valid for the monitoring-evaluation phase. Except that the number of projects that cross the line are still less since from amongst the projects studied, only one out of 18 involves the grassroots at the monitoring-evaluation level.

It is only, therefore, at the execution phase of the project-intermediary phase- that grassroots participation is solicited. At this stage, rare are the projects (15 out of 18) that attempt to call for, in one way or the other, the contribution of the grassroots whom they were to serve. The relationship is almost the opposite of what it is at the identification phase.

There is therefore some sort of "compartmentalization" of participation, "sausaging" it and consuming variable slices of it depending on the cycle of the project considered. Such a conception, obviously is not satisfactory enough.

The disillusion that results from it is all the more acute since at the level of the projects execution, participation remains often treated from a purely utilitarian perspective that is to say, like a flint enabling the project to absorb enough inputs in order to realize the physical performances expected of it. With such an approach, the contributions of the grassroots are seen and can only be valorized in limited terms of production factors and therefore accounted for as such.

Rarely -and in any case never in the projects evaluated in the national reports- is this contribution understood and valorized in terms of organisational capacity or technological achievement. Because of this fact, and for this double limit, there is a diminishing of participation's dimensions to the sphere of its usual value, that is to its food value.

Not doubt these two dimensions shall be treated when we come to deal with participation within the Sahelian context. Indeed one cannot talk here of participation without thinking that it is a means of valorizing resources of all kinds that the projects would be generating in their execution phase.

It is also obvious that manpower and financial capital resulting from it (and which is present in the Sahelian countryside even though at a small scale) could be made use of in order to maximize the results expected of the project.

The fact remains, however, that these elementary truths are only semi-truths where they reduce the participation sphere to its economic dimension alone, where the political dimension of this notion is not taken into account. In such a case, it is a question, and we must repeat, of semi-truths, since we know for a long time, that two semi-truths have never constituted one truth.

It is not surprising therefore that the national consultants of the study on participation arrived at an assessment report that is tinged with the reality of grassroots participation in the projects that they examined. It is not surprising also that they remain bent on looking into the obstacles to real grassroots participation.

II. OBSTACLES TO GRASSROOTS PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS AND ACTIVITIES

The table that one can draw on obstacles to participation is impressive. Referring to the four national reports, there aren't under this heading, less than thirty variables to be taken into consideration. They can however be grouped together, for the purpose of the analysis, into three main categories depending on whether they have as their origin, the populations themselves, the politico-administrative setup or the donors.

2.1. Obstacles linked to the situation of the populations

Following their integration in a world economy dominated by the capitalist profit, Sahelian societies have of late experienced profound mutations that have affected not only their productive structures but also the socio-cultural data that determine in a certain way their ability to participate in development projects and activities. Amongst the more serious of the consequences of these mutations we have :

* The relative pauperization of large fractions of the rural world. The monetarization of the economy that accompanied development where it is not its exclusive content, was translated by an increase in the disparities between urban and rural area and within the rural world itself. Thus, from being autonomous producers fitted into self-subsistence economies, some farmers became objectively speaking, agricultural salary-earners whose work enriched other producers better integrated in the sphere of merchant production. Diverging interests surge in the production trial as social reproduction, thus rendering inoperative the traditional solidarities by emptying them of all their substances.

It is on the basis of these interests that participation in development projects and activities is going to be more or less effective. It happens that several projects can only be of interest either explicitly or implicitly in their objectives, to only a small minority of rural producers.

The Mandoul (Chad) groupings is a case in point : according to the authors of the report "the criteria for becoming a member of the group have resulted in selection through money.... The farmer should pay the sum of 10 000 FCFA on becoming a member. When one studies the monetary earnings of the Mandoul farmer, one notes that it is the equivalent of his entire annual cotton production that he should pay to the group.... These who can without great difficulty join the groups are those farmers with fixed revenues (ex-servicemen with their pensions) and those

with large farms. The rest can only make it by turning to loans or some parent salary-earner in the city. The grouping appears thus not as a Union of the most dynamic farmers but rather that of the most fortunate farmers".*

* The emergence or development of an assisted mentality:

of a more or less Jacobean and Bonapartist inspiration, the Sahelian states' thought it was their role to support their populations and provide them with certain services. It happens that the provision of these services is often done freely and took, still more often, the forms of individual assistance particularly in times of food crisis. Concerning the latter case, the free distribution of food aid mobilized through the international community as well as the system of advances on harvests were the main vectors of the development of this assisted mentality against which the governments now start to react, albeit with little success since in many people is deeply rooted the conviction that it is for the state to solve matters with the means at its disposal.

* Entropy : in the psychological regression sense, numerous human groups, upset in their production and cropping methods by a persistent drought should not also be lost sight of. As a Bororo song goes "when the last cow has crumbled and the last grain consumed, then nothing could anylonger be as before". The seriousness of the crisis is such that as J. BUGNICOURT puts it** "the rural communities no longer have the strength to try reconquering lands and territories" and that they prefer, if not for themselves for their children, the illusions that are provided by salaries that are unfortunately hypothetical in the rural world.

* Chad Report - pages 40 and 41.

** Underlined in his study entitled : "A people deprived of its environment" and published in 1975

* Absence of control of the planning instruments : Even where the underprivileged groups had the will and the power to take control oncemore of their lands, and even if they were to have the same will and the same energy to participate in development activities the fact remains that the modern techniques for planning and evaluating projects are unknown to them and indeed inaccessible to them because they have been developed in languages that they do not control. For this reason, power at the stage of planning-evaluation remains entirely in the hands of the technicians of the administration who possess the necessary expertise for this type of exercise.

* Lastly, we must highlight the difficulties there are in wanting to extend the traditional participation forms (age groups, traditional associations) to areas that upto now were far from their field.

2.2. Obstacles linked to the administrative and socio-political organization of development.

These are numerous and probably constitute, in reality, the main ones that explain for the persistence of speeches on participation, but also the persistence of the non-effectiveness of such participation in the development projects and activities initiated or supported by the State apparatus. In these projects, everything in the structures, the planning, the technologies utilized, the human resources, the communication system, everything seems to be opposed to a genuine participation of the populations who should be the "beneficiaries" according to the celestial language of the State-Providence.

It has already been said : from one country to the other the anthem on participation becomes modulated. However beyond the intonations and the frequencies on which it is played, an analysis of projects would reveal, at these different levels, a number of common factors which constitute serious obstacles to popular participation.

2.2.1. At the structural level, the services charged with promoting participation operate quite often in an administrative ground that is escapist.

An example, striking, albeit far from being the only one of its kind, is the Jahally-Patcharr Project in The Gambia. In this 17.3 million dollar project financed by IFAD, the Netherlands, the ADB, Germany, NFP and The Gambia, the coordination, execution and follow-up functions were entrusted to nothing less than six structures of which three were to come from the grassroots.

Those three latter were a Farmer's Rice Society Committee (FRSC), Women's Rice Growers Committee (WRGC) and a Village based Management Committee (VMC) all of them organs conceived to facilitate grassroots participation in the execution of projects and the control of technical and organisational problems that it would meet.

However from this proliferation of organs and committees whose roles and functions were very little defined was to arise a state of "confusion", of "inertia", fertile ground, we all are aware, for "coordination" problems that are encountered everywhere and which are so delicate to handle, since quite often, there is a competition of social groups whose interests are different. Thus, "superfluous" organs are multiplied and to quote a phrase used concerning Jahally-Patcharr whose "roles and functions are a duplication of those cooperating in the project zone".

Thus, instead of being an instrument of a unitary dynamics, the vector of a synergy of efforts, the projects together with other services for promoting participation end up being, at the structural level, deformed organs, ones that are dislocated and out of alignment with the social reality that surrounds them.

The cause of this may lie in the rigidity of projects but also, and undoubtedly, in the old administrative network which was inherited from colonisation by the Jacobean States. This rigidity of projects can be felt as early as the early stage of expressing needs.

The authors of the Cape Verde report, referring to the Achada Galeia project for which they made a comparative table, established needs felt by the populations depending on whether these needs were partially satisfied by the project or not ; on the other hand the realizations of the project not corresponding to needs expressed by the populations. The table speaks for itself : out of 33 needs expressed, 5 are totally met by the project, 6 partially met and 21 have not been taken into account.

What this table reveals touches the very essence of the project : it is a question of an exogenous intervention which, in social terms, limits or rather delimits the preoccupations without being able to harmonize nor integrate local priorities to national priorities. In the case of Achada Galeia, we are told by the Cape Verdian document that "the project objectives were defined based on the perception that the cadres of the MRD had of the populations' needs". This is indeed a perverse effect but one which is often encountered in the "in vitro" conception of development operations and one which quite often ignores the socio-cultural realities of the milieu and seems able to hear the complaints of the grassroots as is confirmed, some thousands of kilometres away, ⁱⁿ SODELAC's experience (Société de Développement du Lac Tchad).

It is because this human milieu is not known that the participation structures are often artificial and resulting in exogenous options being taken and formulas that one tries to apply schematically, in an imitative manner, when what is required is an endogenous and concerted elaboration of participative models that are adapted to the socio-cultural context.

2.2.2. If one observes the technologies used in many projects, and the way in which these technologies are introduced, one cannot help being struck by the rigidity of the approach.

Here again Chad provides a good example. Indeed, within the framework of the intensive use of pollers, SODELAC, the report tells us "has beaten the gun in all stages of agricultural modernization : we go from the local hoc (daba) to motorization and to the traditional chaouf - a Californian irrigation system. Thus apart from a few works still being undertaken by the farmer, most of the works are mechanized, thus leaving the farmer separated from the life of the project that later on he will be called upon to look after".

2.2.3. Human resources put at the disposal of projects constitutes a third level where one can observe the obstacles to grassroots participation

In many projects, support involves two types of personnel a more or less political personnel recruited from within the structures of the party or from what it represents on the one hand, and a technical personnel more or less well trained by existing educational systems on the other.

Whereas the personnel of the former adopts a paternalistic form of behaviour, the one of the latter has a tendency to adopt an authoritative kind of comportment which is quite well understandable since we are aware of the anti-participative orientation of the educational systems in force in the countries of the Sahel.

Neither of these types of personnel and of the comportments associated with them is in a position to promote grassroots participation, that is to say to let the people take care of their own problems. To the contrary, these types of personnel would only prolong or even strengthen at the popularization or sensitization stage, the rigour already mentioned at the level of the structures.

2.2.4. However the main obstacle probably lies elsewhere : in the very ambiguity of the notion of participation

In the final analysis, participation involves a policy option that is as extremely complex as it is fundamental. It raises questions that politicians and planners have a hard time answering frankly who takes the options? How are the options implemented? Is participation a means or an end, that is to say an integral part of the style of development that one aims at promoting?

It is because such questions do not always find sufficient answers that from the point of view of a number of development specialists and planners, real participation, the one that influences the very content of development, the one which promotes fresh approaches to problems, and one which by the same token guarantees the rights of the participants to the fruits of development, remains an aspiration difficult to materialize.

The difficulty is all the more acute as numerous are the instances where the State's objectives and those of the grassroots contradict each other. The difficulties experienced by the "animation" movements in Niger and in Chad

are, in this regard, eloquent. Despite the dire will of their advocates to let the "villager" get integrated in his environment, the determining factor of any development policy, the very break with the old methods of disseminating technical progress through "farmer heads" or "pilot farmers" notwithstanding, Animation in these two countries stumbled against socio-economic and socio-political obstacles which had the upperhand in so short a time.

The socio-economic obstacles arose from the fact that there was contradiction between the objectives of the State (increase cashcrop production) and the farmers' objectives (increase food production) ; contradiction also between the type of Animation that sought to involve the farmer and the popularization services which imbued with precise agro-economic objectives, wanted to see the farmers implement very strict techniques.

As for the socio-political obstacles, they were as a result of the contradiction between the farmers' claims and the authoritarian reactions of an administrative system that did not change its methods.

In the two countries cited, in the face of the political risk that the attempt to liberate the farmers' voice (the confessed objective of Rural Animation) could entail, the authorities preferred being cautious by purely and simply putting an end to the experience.

Lastly, it is important to note that the land tenure question has not been treated anywhere in a manner to guarantee the communities' security but rather as a means to guarantee the State's preeminence.

Everything happens as if "power to the grassroots" beyond the very slogan, only inspires within the State personnel sheer worry and the creating of institutional railings so numerous as they are for external use, that is to say they are meant to satisfy exigencies, placate those without whom this State personnel would no longer exist or would exist less, for without them, no project for which they are the national counterparts ; without them none of these disguised subsidies that it earns as compensation for the low nominal salaries.

The donors - since they are the ones referred to - weigh heavily since financial resources have been limited by the world economic crisis. They constitute, as a group, the third level, in terms of obstacles to a popular participation in development.

2.3. OBSTACLES LINKED TO DONORS

Even where certain successful experiences lead to accepting with some reservation the long complaint by local technicians against donors, the responsibility of the latter remains significant in the failures of numerous projects which were aimed at involving the grassroots. The "in vitro" conception of operations, the rigour of support staff, the heaviness of the structures, the slowness in information flow, the brutality in introducing certain sophisticated technologies ; nothing that is labelled habitually, including the assisted mentality of the State personnel and that of the populations, is not part of the donors doing.

Their strength arises, of course from the investments that they make, however such strength is far from being limited to the sole area of financial management.

In fact, as depositaries of a certain culture, these donors pursue ideological, economic or political interests which lead them to interfere in decision-making of a structural order, at times to the detriment of the orientations or the procedures drawn-up by the State, and often to the detriment of the grassroots so far away from the offices where their fate is being determined..

The logic guiding these donors is technocratic and productivist in essence, that is to say that the determining considerations in the project identification and implementation are technical considerations. The pre-feasibility, feasibility, evaluation of the internal profitability studies associated to each project go to increase the negative effects of an already biased approach because not sufficiently paying heed to the socio-economic or socio-cultural constraints of the milieu.

3. WHAT IS TO BE DONE ?

If we do not subscribe to the view of an A. MEISTER for whom "community development, rural animation and all participationist approach are slow techniques and, in reference to the autonomy of the person and to the democratic process, of insipid techniques (1)", then the question not of "why participation" but of "how to arouse participation" arises.

The first condition is to take the social reality, as constituted historically, as starting point since it is true that an authentic participation policy and practice cannot be conceived outside of a concrete reality. It is ⁱⁿ reference to this reality that the problem of participation should be appreciated, measuring that which in this social reality, favours it or exclude it. It is only in this way that the concrete consequences, in a given context, could be drawn of a number of references that are general in scope and principles which we shall now harp upon to end these observations

3.1. Participation and its institutional forms depend on the policy options made in relation to societal projects.

However, policy projects often remain hazy, hence the ambiguities weighing on the concept of participation. There is urgent need to clarify these ambiguities and to define with utmost precision the objectives, content and the forms that we wish to give to participation.

As R. COLIN wrote in a report published by UNESCO in 1979 "we must be able to place ourselves at a given point of this wide range that has been deployed between passive participation, integrating the behaviour of the subject in a given system outside of his choice and, completely at the far end, active participation in a system built by the subject based on his own options, this latter formula covering self-management".

If we opt in earnest for responsible participation as has been characterized at the beginning of this note, participation becomes not only a means of increasing the performances of the development process but also an end, and in this light it ought to be accepted and treated as forming part of the "essential human needs", (*) like education, health, shelter, etc

Even though the challenge may be daunting, progress is not impossible in this direction.

(*) the use of the notion of "essential human needs" does not necessarily imply subscribing to the "strategy" of the same name, made popular by ILO, OECD and the World Bank amongst others.

3.2. Participation is dependent upon socio-cultural models lived by the participants

There is no participation without culture. And it is precisely because Negro-African cultures are in essence community ones that one imagined a few years ago that the scope of participation would be relatively easy to obtain in Africa. This was not so mainly because even though certain values of traditional societies could serve as levers to participation, others are opposed to any authentic participation.

In any case, the question of participation evolves as does culture on the one hand and on the other there is no participation without awareness of the cultural identity which implies belonging to a given group. It is, besides, because we were not able to take into consideration cultural identity which expresses itself through differences, that several projects which supposedly were meant to promote popular participation had the end that we all know.

3.3. Participation can only be conceived through a dynamic optique of the institutional system

To a greater extent participation is antinomic to systems.

The latter, even though their end-objectives is to stimulate participation, harbour men-instruments with interests as "flesh", if not class ones which could develop to the point of being antagonistic with those of the populations they are meant to serve. But these men-instruments support staff- have, through their position, all the power. The dislocation of the instruments constitute quite often then, a preamble for giving a thrust to the social dynamics in the way of participation.

Efforts are being deployed here and there in order to arrive at it, so as to submit staffing to social supervision ; the defunctionalisation of the staff of Niger's intervention companies, their real but progressive suppression in Senegal are living examples in this connection. However it must be said that this is not without resistance nor is it without gnashing of teeth, for, the professionalisation of power is a deeprooted reality in the register of habits and social behaviours inherited from the colonial Administration.

To remove the constraints that inhibit the initiatives of grassroots communities is however not enough. This precondition for the State's disengagement, in order not to appear as retreat or complacency, should be accompanied by the provision to the populations of basis for judgement and minimum competences in order to be able to intervene in the decisions to be taken : here we find the crucial problem of information and training of which so much has been said but for which much remains to be done as has been proven by a good number of projects reviewed which failed because they had no appropriate informational and educational component. It is now a truth that has been lived that real participation, the one which is translated by the setting-up of a real "partnership" system*, shall be born out of power-sharing, but also from information, for, to share information means to share power.

3.4. Participation implies that the needs expressed at the grassroots level be really taken into consideration and that the statutes and the subsistence of the economy be revised in earnest as well as the planning methods.

One cannot want one thing and at the same time the opposite. By testing productivistic criteria of those institutions that are oriented towards participation, one is from the start destroying the participation system. The myth that productivity is the highest point of reference is quite often a delusion if not a danger ; and it is not the projects reviewed in national reports and built according to this productivistic logic that will prove the contrary.

It is true that the myth is not easy to discard nor is it easy to escape the productivist logic in the projects ; the exigencies of the donors who subscribe to this logic, are more and more numerous, whereas the internal financial resources are limited.

However not to reject the myth, is not it, frankly speaking, compromising the future? There again, we come back to the question of choice of society. A choice which obviously is highly political !

* Chad report P, 72