

*Dryland Networks Programme*

ISSUES PAPER

# **Writing from Experience: Grassroots work in Senegal**

Nohoune Lèye

**IIED**

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Nohoune Lèye can be contacted at BP 10, Khombole, Thiès, Senegal. We are grateful to Olivia Graham, formerly of RITA/ALIN, Dakar, for the editing of this paper.

*Translation: Jean Lubbock*

# **Writing from Experience: Grassroots work in Senegal**

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## Writing from Experience: Grassroots work in Senegal

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Nohoune Lèye has worked for many years as a development worker in Senegal. He has been involved in financial and administrative management with a large NGO and also has had much experience of participative research with village groups with whom he currently works. He has encouraged farmers to experiment with different methods of composting, hay and silage making and soil and water conservation. He is also a prolific correspondent. Over the past two years he has sent over 30 letters and contributions to Haramata on different subjects, ranging from the use of neem leaves as an insecticide to his thoughts on the Rio Conference.

Here we share some of his ideas with Haramata readers. The first section of this paper looks at development projects - the main underpinning of "progress" in many developing countries, and discusses their failure to take into account the social and cultural conditions in which they operate.

The second section considers some of the reasons why development projects fail and how the use of local advisers by northern NGOs could help prevent this.

## I. SOCIAL EXPECTATIONS AND DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS: REFOCUSING ON BASIC CONCERNS

Projects are the basis of development for most African countries who, since the first years of independence, have sought to define many-faceted strategies with a view to promoting development consonant with the people's aspirations.

Achieving this objective implied involvement of the people in all stages of the development process.

In order to gain a better understanding of the way people think, it is vital to work out a new strategy which takes their concerns into account. Such research will be meaningless unless it is conducted in the field.

Nowadays, despite the undeniable progress made by the Sahelian countries of Africa towards development and modernism, a degree of disillusion has set in. Projects, seen as ideal development tools because they are quantifiable and measurable, have come in for a great deal of criticism.

Some people think that such judgements should be tempered because, on the one hand, failures are not as numerous as it is sometimes claimed and, on the other, the combined effects of drought and the deterioration of the terms of trade have thrown conventional economic indicators into disarray.

Other observers remark that many projects collapse once external aid is withdrawn, while some lead to open conflict and obstructions. Fraud, misappropriation and use of funds for purposes other than those agreed upon are amongst the negative aspects associated with projects.

Understanding sociological phenomena and how they fit into the design, launching and operation of a project is not always easy, inasmuch as decision-makers do not usually share the cultural background of those for whom the project is intended.

Urban projects tend to target individuals who may possibly come together to form an association. In the case of rural development projects, production targets are supposed to be achieved by structured human communities whose value systems may be more or less resistant to change.

In Africa and in so-called developing countries in general, there has been a tendency to ignore the specific characteristics of the nation, region, or place where development projects are to be set up. Attempts are often made to use projects to standardise the social behaviour of a target population according to the rules of "scientific organisation of work".

However, overlooking or underestimating the sociological dimension in development projects can have unexpected results, for instance with regard to the use of the "technological packages" made available to local people. The unexpected consequences and failures of projects, as well as the way these are reinterpreted by the target population, show that projects frequently reflect a mode of social organisation and a value system which are wholly or partially at variance with local conditions.

### **Conflicting socio-cultural expectations**

Development projects designed to assist small farmers usually set themselves two main objectives:

- improving living standards
- increasing income

To achieve these, the development agency calls in technicians and experts who are deployed in the field to deal with technical obstructions to increased production or organisational and management problems within the agency itself or the public administration.

However, the most important thing is not the project documentation or rationale, but rather the actual content of projects and the methods employed by those responsible for management, supervision/training and animation. Genuine socio-cultural issues do arise within and around rural development projects. Grasping the nature and possible implications of these issues involves recognising that development is not a neutral concept, as it is coloured by socio-cultural and ideological perceptions.

It is apparent, therefore, that taking account of cultural factors in development projects involves looking at the balance of power which structures international relations and social differentiation on a national or local scale.

In fact, the need to respect the socio-cultural particularities of the project area is not always treated as seriously as it should be by beneficiary countries. It often happens that national and international decision-makers enter into alliances or even act in collusion with each other. In such cases, development projects can become instruments of political pressure and cultural and ideological conditioning within a context of social confrontation or antagonism between town and country or between developed and so-called developing countries.

The development of applied social sciences in rural areas of Africa and elsewhere has thrown sufficient light on the concerns which underpin peasant thinking.

The legitimacy of peasant societies is usually based on consideration of the constraints and potential of the local eco-system (natural environment), agricultural system and socio-economic system.

These considerations lie behind peasant strategy in respect of development projects designed on their behalf. It is well known that the two basic characteristics of African rural societies, and indeed all agrarian civilisations, are uncertain agricultural production, primarily as a result of climatic variations, and uncertain social reproduction, as a result of failing to overcome health problems. This gives rise to social behaviour based mainly on contingency planning, i.e. on efforts to reduce the effects of uncertainty.

Instead of taking account of these underlying concerns, new projects often tend to increase uncertainty by taking away from peasant societies a large part of their control over their own productive and reproductive circumstances, thereby reducing their capacity for contingency planning.

The failure of many projects is therefore connected with this weakening of the imaginative and creative capacity of peasant societies. On top of this, such projects do not always take account of local conceptions of land and its various functions.

Moreover, problems in both rural and urban areas are constantly changing: while some have been around for 15 years, others have arisen more recently.



Are development projects really aware of the scale of such changes? How do they plan to cope with them?

Finally, concepts such as self-reliance and empowering local people in respect of their own development may influence thinking about the type of assistance and training required.

Surely the time has come for projects to make some changes. For instance, should not the duties and qualifications of development workers be modified to ensure that greater responsibility is passed on to beneficiaries?

## **II. SEPARATING THE WHEAT FROM THE CHAFF: REASONS FOR THE FAILURE OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS**

It is important not to romanticise rural development associations. Some have become more skilled in preparing funding requests than assisting local people.

Groups, farmer associations and NGOs have multiplied, some of them with the sole purpose of seeking funds from abroad. This is not very difficult for such organisations, especially if they concentrate on popular themes: environment, women, children, savings and credit.

The logic of project funding is extremely perverse. It often causes organisations seeking aid to look for funding opportunities rather than analyse real needs. No one takes the time to think things through as project follows project and progress report follows funding request.

Many organisations get caught up in the rules of the project game, having to finish within the project period and ensure that objectives are met. It would only be a slight exaggeration to say that the aim of carrying out the project ends up taking priority over the real situation on the ground, the needs of the target groups and the most appropriate solutions.

Organisations stagger between bad management, lying and perverting the "project". Many of them tend to boast about things that they are not doing and are reluctant to recognise their failures.

In order to gain access to funding, precise objectives must be set. Yet, in reality, the approach is radically different.

Development associations have been doing "projects" for two years or, in some cases, four or five. How and by whom were they formulated? On the basis of which concerns? Are they economically viable? What problems are they solving? On whose behalf? Are they giving rise to dependency, autonomy or tyranny? Here again, one good criterion for evaluation would surely be to see how much responsibility has been transferred during the project. Which of the operations conducted by project workers in the first year are being done by the villagers in the third or fifth year? In which fields have such workers become redundant? And how has this occurred?

Project operations should in principle be training exercises. Have the beneficiaries learned to use the tools which would enable them to formulate, plan, implement, manage and evaluate such operations?

If they have, it would be a good idea to capitalise on these experiences so that they could be communicated to others. Analysing successes is more important than analysing failures. It helps to identify the key factors responsible for success. However, in cases of failure, it is vital to pin-point the true causes, which always lie deeper than those which spring immediately to mind.

Many organisations are not as "pure" as they would like the public to believe. They are often flawed and glaringly inadequate. There is no end to the number of cases of misuse by officials for their private gain of the assets of organisations seeking aid.

There are plenty of associations who begin where some of their counterparts in the north ended, i.e. getting their activities funded by governmental or parastatal agencies. So far, there have been no campaigns to mobilise "public generosity".

"It is difficult to organise fund-raising campaigns. Those which have been run, such as the "one woman, one grain of gold" campaign in Senegal, have disappointed and discouraged many citizens who saw them as no more than attempts to deceive."

A contradiction lies at the very heart of the operation of a good number of "projects". The point about an association running a project is that the members are supposed to run it. This is not always the case.

There are many examples of very small groups, where two or three officials rule the roost. This can lead to feelings of powerlessness, resignations or

increased dependency and also lies behind many project failures. Africa has been called the "graveyard of failed experiments".

An irreversible trend seems to have begun: setting up "projects" which do not spring from the perceptions of local people and are thus artificial. The project is seen as an end rather than a means and serves selfish interests rather than those of the local community, ultimately alienating the latter.

Development workers should be less concerned with setting up a project than with facilitating a process whereby local people can analyse the issues, establish priorities and consider ways of tackling them.

The primary objective should be to improve situations which local people find unsatisfactory.

The majority of northern partners will not accept funding requests from southern organisations without letters of support signed by third parties, indicating that the reliability of many such organisations is yet to be proven. Cases of fraud, misuse, theft and misappropriation within projects are legion.

#### **The potential role of local advisers**

It is high time that consideration was given to partnership contracts for motivated local consultants, which would determine precise objectives, phases, deadlines and resources. Organisations seeking funds would have to be monitored by local consultants, making assessment easier.

In view of the wide range of project requests which come before northern funders seeking to support small scale projects, it is clear that such funders need additional information from an outside source. In such circumstances, the funder might seek the assistance of local advisers.

In terms of project and programme funding requests, the funders would expect to receive first of all from the adviser some more detailed information about the partner organisation and the request itself. Secondly, they would expect an opinion about the extent to which the request in question meets the criteria and priorities of project policy, as well as how the request fits in with social, economic and political developments in the specific local or regional context.

In terms of the context within which partner organisations operate, the funders should expect additional information on the development process and the activities of the authorities and other bodies working at local, regional and national level which could affect the work of the partner organisations. On request, the local adviser could also give an opinion in this regard.

Where small grants are concerned, funders are still faced with numerous requests arising from different situations. It could be useful to call in external advisers to investigate the organisations submitting requests and check that the project is worthwhile. Furthermore, such a strategy would not prevent the funders from dealing directly with their partners. The local adviser would help the funders in identifying partners and monitoring the way in which grants are used.

The funders would expect local advisers to give an opinion as to whether requests for small grants broadly fit in with the funder's policy and objectives.

The funders should also expect the advisers to give opinions which are biased neither towards the funder nor the partner organisation. Finally, it is vital that the adviser should have a degree of knowledge and experience of development work in the country concerned.

The funders would make the necessary arrangements to inform the local adviser about their policy and working methods and any changes which might occur in respect of these. This could be done through correspondence and submission of policy documents, meetings between local advisers and officials of the donor agency during working visits to the country concerned or through a special information programme.

In most cases, the funders would ask local advisers to give an opinion about partner agencies and project proposals. Moreover, funders could request advice about ongoing projects, for instance in cases where a partner wishes to change the initial objective of a project. Funders might also ask local advisers to take part in monitoring a team which is to evaluate a programme or some aspect of a project.

Furthermore, funders should expect an adviser to provide, on request or on their own initiative, information and opinions about general developments at regional or local level which are likely to influence the implementation of the funder's small grant policy or the activities of the adviser. The local adviser may, in such cases, provide advice to the funder about the appropriateness of conducting certain studies. Funders could ask advisers to take part in drawing up policy documents about a programme or project.

Monitoring projects would be part of the adviser's duties. Obviously, project implementation would be the partner's responsibility. Such monitoring is motivated by the need to prevent fraud, in view of the difficulty of ensuring that grants are actually used for the agreed purpose.

### **The position of the adviser in the relationship between funder and partners**

The adviser is not a representative of the funder and as such cannot therefore give any authorisation or accept any obligations on behalf of the funder. It is not the funder's intention that the adviser should become an additional link in the chain of communications between funders and their partners. Advisers would only be brought in on a temporary, ad-hoc basis.

The adviser is expected to have a positive influence on the relationship between the funder and partner, by providing the funder with additional information about the partner and by informing the partner about the funder's funding policy. In this latter respect, the adviser may indicate where a project proposal requires further elaboration or explanation. However, direct assistance to a partner in formulating (or reformulating) a project proposal is not a task for an adviser. A funder would consider such assistance as compromising the independence of the adviser's opinion.

Before calling in an adviser, the funders would advise the partners and ask them to agree to a visit from the adviser. The funders would always clearly explain to the partners that the adviser's opinion is only one of the elements on which the funders will base their decision-making in respect of funding project requests. In other words, the adviser must not be held responsible for the funder's final decision.

### **Possible disadvantages of using local advice**

There could be some objections to the use of local advisers, such as the danger of concentrating power in the hands of a few people, the risk of encountering problems such as pressure groups, corruption and so on. Using advisers could undermine implementation of the funder's policies. Advisers could become a new instrument for control or throw their weight about. Advisers could provide distorted analyses and could be seen as representatives of the funders.

In order to minimise such problems, advisers should be appointed on an ad-hoc basis and primarily to investigate requesting organisations and check that their projects are feasible. A clear appeal procedure should be made known to those seeking funds. Advisers should check that grants are being used for the agreed purpose.

It could happen that an adviser has a particular relationship, either of a personal or formal nature, with the partner about whom he or she is being asked to give an opinion. In such cases, the funder would expect the adviser to make this known before giving an opinion.





**Dryland Networks Programme**

**INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT**

**3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, England**

**Tel: (44-71) 388.2117 Fax: (44-71) 388.2826**

**Telex: 261681 EASCAN G**