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How will West African countries meet the MDGs?

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“For successful sustainable development, the focus and weight of effort must be at the level where integration really occurs, that is, in the lives and livelihoods of poor and excluded people. They must be central, not only as targets of development, but as analysts, designers and managers of the development process.”⁽²⁾

I. INTRODUCTION

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provide clear global targets which are ambitious but also fairly tangible. They offer a clear commitment to much improving access to water, cutting maternal and infant deaths, getting kids into school and halving the number of people suffering hunger and poverty. This seems a practical agenda, with clear quantifiable targets against which to

1. This chapter draws heavily on work undertaken for the OECD's Sahel and West Africa Club. See Toulmin, C and B Guèye (2003), *Transformations in West African Agriculture*, OECD, Paris.

2. Conway, Gordon (2003), "The Paradoxes of Integrated Development", Keynote Address at the ECOSOC Brainstorming Dialogue Sessions: "Promoting an integrated approach to rural development in developing countries for poverty eradication and sustainable development", UN Headquarters, New York, 24 March.



“Can a closer focus on governance and institutional development at local level provide a better approach to delivering fairer and more equitable patterns of development?”

measure progress. This chapter tries to assess how some of these goals might be achieved in the case of West Africa, and the focus required at different levels. This regional focus is a result of IIED’s long-standing work in this part of the world, and recent research which focuses on poverty, livelihoods and the future of family farming in a global economy. We focus here on agriculture, since this is the basis for the incomes and livelihoods of the majority of the population in this region. Agriculture continues to provide a major source of revenue for government and foreign exchange earnings. However, we also recognize the close links between rural and urban activity, and the great diversification in sources of income gained by rural dwellers. We seek in this chapter to ask: how might local actors and processes be better integrated into achievement of the MDGs? And, in particular, can a closer focus on governance and institutional development at local level provide a better approach to delivering fairer and more equitable patterns of development?

II. THE WEST AFRICAN REGION

West Africa is a vast and diverse region, stretching from the dry shores of Mauritania and Senegal in the northwest down to the coastal forestlands along the Gulf of Guinea, and eastwards to Lake Chad and the Cameroon highlands. This great expanse contains 17 nation states,⁽³⁾ ranging in size from almost 120 million inhabitants in Nigeria to 0.4 million in Cape Verde. Of the 17 countries, 14 are classified as “least developed countries”. The limited data available on access to health, education, safe water and adequate sanitation show poor levels of provision. Table 7.1 shows how low life expectancies are in most nations in the region, and also the low adult literacy rates and large proportions of children not in primary school. From this Table, one can also see that ten countries from the West African region can be found amongst the lowest 20 rankings according to the UNDP’s Human Development Index in 2001.

3. Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Chad, Côte d’Ivoire, Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone and Togo.

Table 7.1: Basic data on West Africa, 2001

Nation/region	Population (millions)	Life Expectancy at birth (years)	Adult literacy rate (%)	Net primary enrolment ratio (%)	GDP per capita (US \$)	RANK (1-175) on the Human Development Index	"Least developed country"
Benin	6.4	50.9	38.6	–	368	159	Yes
Burkina Faso	12.3	45.8	24.8	36	215	173	Yes
Cape Verde	0.4	69.7	74.9	99	1317	103	Yes
Chad	8.1	44.6	44.2	58	202	165	Yes
Côte d'Ivoire	16.1	41.7	49.7	64	634	161	No
Gambia	1.4	53.7	37.8	69	291	151	Yes
Ghana	20.0	57.7	72.7	58	269	129	No
Guinea	8.2	48.5	41.0	47	394	157	Yes
Guinea-Bissau	1.4	45.0	39.6	54	162	166	Yes
Liberia	3.1	41.4	54.8	–	–	–	Yes
Mali	12.3	48.4	26.4	43	239	172	Yes
Mauritania	2.7	51.9	40.7	64	366	154	Yes
Niger	11.1	45.6	16.5	30	175	174	Yes
Nigeria	117.8	51.8	65.4	–	319	152	No
Senegal	9.6	52.3	38.3	63	476	156	Yes
Sierra Leone	4.6	34.5	36.0	–	146	175	Yes
Togo	4.7	50.3	58.4	92	270	141	Yes
Sub-Saharan Africa	626.4	46.5	62.4	59	475	–	n/a

SOURCE: UNDP (2003), *Human Development Report 2003*; *Millennium Development Goals: A Compact among Nations to End Human Poverty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 367 pages. Note that some of the statistics are for years other than those shown; see the tables in the back of the source noted above for details.

The legacies of history

Devastated by centuries of warfare and slave-raiding, all countries within the West African region, with the exception of Liberia, were then subjected during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to colonial occupation by the British, French, Portuguese and others. Carved out without much care for underlying social, cultural and economic dimensions, they have faced great difficulties in attaining political consensus regarding how countries will be managed and the distribution of power and wealth. As a result, in some countries, political tensions have burst into civil war and prolonged conflicts. But in many nations, there has also been an increasing move towards more democratic political



“Taking food and export crops together, many West African countries have been remarkably successful in generating rising levels of output in response to market demand at national, regional and global levels”

structures, with a growing role for civil society groups, within a more decentralized pattern of local government.

Regional economic initiatives are helping dissolve some of the barriers created by national boundaries, such as the West African Economic and Monetary Union, and ECOWAS groupings. People themselves often ignore frontiers and formalities. The region is criss-crossed by flows of people, on seasonal and longer-term migration, some seeking jobs and others land for settlement. Some are refugees from conflict and penury but, for many, migration is a means to seeking out a better life

III. EVIDENCE OF POVERTY

Conventional wisdom, as expressed in many studies on rural poverty in Africa, asserts that farmers have seen few if any improvements in yields and incomes and are, in many cases, becoming further impoverished. According to this view, the combined effects of low yields, poor market prices and limited access to credit and other inputs are leading to a downward spiral of impoverishment and decapitalization. It is common to hear of African agriculture being “in crisis”. Yet, in practice, performance has been much more mixed. This emphasis on “crisis” presents too negative a view of the transformations in West African agriculture over recent decades.

As recent work for the OECD shows:

“Taking food and export crops together, many West African countries have been remarkably successful in generating rising levels of output in response to market demand at national, regional and global levels. Such evidence suggests that the farming sector has great capacity to increase production when conditions are right. This is even more marked if account is taken of the growth in many lesser crops for which data are not collected on a systematic basis, such as sheanut, sesame, fruit and vegetables.”⁽⁴⁾

4. Wiggins, S (2000), “Interpreting changes from the 1970s to the 1990s in African agriculture through village studies”, *World Development* Vol 28, No 4.



In the case of Nigeria:

“Production and distribution systems have grown over the past several decades, and possibly at a rate which compares favourably with other historical cases even if not with the great spurt achieved in Asia through Green Revolution technologies. The food system has responded to demand despite difficulties of transport, no refrigeration, a narrow range of storage techniques and no commodity futures market. So even if up to 20 per cent of food has been imported at certain moments, even if some of the urban poor fail to meet nutritional standards, and even if many urban inhabitants also farm, in comparative and historical terms the feeding of Nigerian towns across the great waves of macro-economic and political fluctuation has been an impressive achievement of productive technique and social achievement.”⁽⁵⁾

West Africa’s agriculture, far from facing “crisis”, has been remarkably successful and responsive to new markets and opportunities. As shown by Mortimore’s study of farm performance over 1960–2000 for six West African countries, smallholders in most countries have been able to increase substantially their levels of output and productivity, despite often adverse conditions.⁽⁶⁾

Data adequacy

There are inevitable weaknesses in the quality of data available to assess levels of poverty and how these have changed in recent times. Such weaknesses stem both from how household surveys have been carried out (size, representivity, time period etc.) and from assumptions made regarding the nature and sources of household income. Thus, for example, household budget data are notoriously difficult to collect due to an inability or unwillingness to recall the details of incomes received and transactions

“West Africa’s agriculture, far from facing ‘crisis’, has been remarkably successful and responsive to new markets and opportunities”

5. Guyer, J (1997), *An African Niche Economy: farming to feed Ibadan 1968–88*, Edinburgh University Press, pages 4–5.

6. Mortimore, M (2003) *The contribution of family farms in West Africa: What can we learn from long term data?* Paper prepared for Toulmin, C and Guèye, B (2003) op. cit. To be published as Drylands Issue Paper, No 120, IIED, London.



“Household surveys often fail to provide complete coverage of all sources of income, focusing on the most obvious activities and ignoring the rest”

undertaken. This is especially so where, as in many large rural households, members are pursuing both collective and individual activities. The household head will rarely be able to speak on behalf of the many individuals within the family, and their private incomes and patterns of spending. Equally, there may be a strong reticence in admitting to the significance of private activities and incomes, since these represent an aberration from the social ideal of collective endeavour.

The question of valuing income is also problematic for households which rely on food and services largely produced by household members. These comprise not only the family’s regular grain supply but also a range of other foodstuffs, livestock produce and a range of materials gathered from the bush.

Incomplete understanding of household income diversity

Household surveys often fail to provide complete coverage of all sources of income, focusing on the most obvious activities and ignoring the rest. Thus, for example, the Mali poverty survey of 1998–99 came up with the surprising conclusion that families in the southern part of the country were amongst the poorest, a result which the authors of the report themselves noted as being counter-intuitive.⁽⁷⁾

However, a closer look at the data showed that this finding had emerged because the survey had focused only on the incomes gained by farmers from sales of cotton. Most farm households in southern Mali practice a much more diverse range of activities, including trade, livestock-rearing, vegetable and orchard production, and reliance on bush produce. In addition, many such households gain a large proportion of income from migrants’ remittances, especially those stemming from Côte d’Ivoire. Hence, actual income was probably two to three times higher than that estimated by the survey. A recent review of the Poverty Reduction

7. ODHD (1999), “Croissance, équité et pauvreté”, *Rapport National sur le Développement Humain Durable, Observatoire du Développement Humain Durable et de la Lutte contre la Pauvreté au Mali, Bamako.*



Strategy Paper process in Mali confirms the extreme weakness of the statistical survey:

“Basic data about economic activity, incomes and employment are missing. Poverty profiles do not provide all the information required for the design of a global anti-poverty strategy. Developing the statistical system has not been one of the government’s priorities. This could hinder an effective and sustainable poverty monitoring process.”⁽⁸⁾

Risks of bias

There may be some temptation for governments to underestimate incomes in order to ensure their country remains within the UN category of “Least Developed Country” and qualifies for poverty-focused aid funds. There are grounds for concern that using poverty as a major criterion for distribution of aid funds will lead countries to demonstrate low and falling levels of income, to maximize their receipts of donor funding.

A broader look at rural livelihoods

A detailed study of rural livelihoods in southern Mali showed that three elements were considered key to sustaining household welfare and avoiding impoverishment:⁽⁹⁾

- ◆ **household management**, which refers to how well the household is managed, it being widely believed that the situation faced by a poorer household can be considerably improved by good judgement and handling. Conversely, a well-off household can see its fortunes ruined by bad management of people and assets;
- ◆ **labour**, which describes not only the number of people in the household workforce but also its composition in terms of age and gender. A household with a relatively young labour force with a balance between the genders is considered much more sustainable than one where there are few young people; and

“Using poverty as a major criterion for distribution of aid funds may lead countries to demonstrate low and falling levels of income, to maximize their receipts of donor funding”

8. Danté, Idrissa et al. (2003), “Mali”, *Development Policy Review* Vol 21, No 2, pages 217–234.

9. Brock, K and N Coulibaly (1999), “Sustainable rural livelihoods in Mali”, Research Report No 35, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.



“Studies of changes to household circumstances which span a 10–20-year time period points to a diverse set of pathways, only some of which imply greater impoverishment”

- ◆ **wealth**, which incorporates ownership of various assets, such as agricultural equipment, and livestock of value to the farming enterprise as well as a source of cash in times of need.

According to these criteria, the better-off households were those who were able to mobilize a large workforce, not only to cultivate several fields and crops but also to pursue a diverse range of income-generating activities, both collectively and for their individual gain. At the same time, larger households could provide better protection for their members from demographic variability, and generate a larger surplus from which to build up household assets. By contrast, the poorest and most vulnerable households were typically small in terms of workforce, with few livestock and other productive assets. As a result, they found it difficult to maintain a viable farming enterprise and could offer their members few opportunities to earn incomes of their own, since all earnings must be put into the common pot. Often, they also had few social links to other members of the village, having settled relatively recently. These factors together help explain how some families could develop and expand activities while others suffered misfortune.

There are relatively few studies of changes to household circumstances which span a 10–20-year time period. However, where such evidence does exist it points to a diverse set of pathways, only some of which imply greater impoverishment. A study of Dalonguebougou, in central Mali (over the period 1980–1998), found a mixed picture, but with most households better off over the 18-year period. The local Bambara say that a family’s fortunes are like the feet of a traditional weaver – at one moment the left foot is up, but later on it will fall and the right foot will rise high. This suggests a level of social mobility that is probably closer to theory than reality. In practice, it is easier for larger, better-off families to withstand risk and invest in the equipment, cattle and marriage alliances necessary to assure their longer-term sustainability. Nevertheless, a large well-off family can see its fortunes diminished through a

Box 7.1: What can I buy in Babou's shop?

Items in Babou Dembelé's shop in 1980:

- ◆ Tea, sugar, soap, cigarettes (Liberté only), salt, petrol, sweets, kola, dates.

Items in Babou Dembelé's shop in 1998:

- ◆ Tea, sugar, soap, cigarettes (many brands), salt, petrol, sweets, kola, dates, nail varnish, chocolate biscuits, scissors, rattles for babies, honey (local), biscuits (chocolate), rope

(nylon), rope (baobab), string, razor blades, lamps, milk, soap powder, spare parts (bike), spare parts (moped), tyres, clothes, well pails, plastic pots, cooking pots, knives, tomato concentrate, bike pumps, thread, cotton fabric (local), cotton fabric (manufactured), batteries (several sizes), tea (brown), coffee, flip flops, kerosene, matches....

SOURCE: Brock, K and N Coulibaly (1999), "Sustainable rural livelihoods in Mali", Research Report No 35, Institute of Development Studies, Brighton.

combination of misfortunes, such as illness, death, internal dissent and household break-up.⁽¹⁰⁾

One demonstration of the increased income and purchasing power of villagers in a rural community like Dalonguebougou can be seen by the enormous change in their access to goods over 18 years. From two small table-traders in 1980, the village now has five stores stocking many different goods. Box 7.1 shows the content of Babou Dembelé's shop in the village, which is a symbol of such changes.

However, while some farm households have been getting better off, others have not been so successful. A process of growing social and economic differentiation is frequently noted as taking place.⁽¹¹⁾ This is not a recent process, but has probably always existed due to the differing capacities of households to cope with risk and shocks. Associated with differentiation is a widespread increase in market-based relations, which means that many commodities which were formerly given freely, lent or exchanged, are now being traded for cash. As noted earlier, in many areas, access to land is now often subject to a significant cash payment, while formerly it could be got on long-term indefinite loan.⁽¹²⁾ Where sales of grain had in the past been discouraged, to retain sufficient stocks for times of need, villagers are now

10. Toulmin, C (1992), *Cattle, Women and Wells; Managing Household Survival in the Sahel*, Clarendon Press, Oxford; also Brock and Coulibaly (1999), *op. cit.*

11. Watts, M (1983), *Silent Violence; Food, Famine and Peasantry in Northern Nigeria*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

12. Lavigne, P et al. (2002), "Negotiating access to land in West Africa: a synthesis of findings from research on derived rights to land", IIED/GRET, London.



“Recent research in southern Burkina Faso speaks of an increasing number of elderly people left with no one willing to care for them”

selling off their surplus. Looser collective ties within the broader community and the family group, combined with weaker commitment to long-term reciprocity, bring greater vulnerability for weaker members. Not only are richer households less willing to help out a poorer neighbour but, in some families, the old and poor may be left to care for themselves much more than before. Recent research in southern Burkina Faso speaks of an increasing number of elderly people left with no one willing to care for them.⁽¹³⁾ At the limit, those who have no other option may move to town, in the hopes of finding work, food and shelter.

In summary, have rural people become better off over the last 20–30 years? It is difficult to paint a clear picture with regard to overall changes in incomes and welfare for West African farmers. While some have done well and flourished, others have become poorer. Micro-level case material shows that many households have been able to take advantage of new opportunities and improve their circumstances, through more dispersed allocations of family labour, migration and other activities. The evidence does not support a picture of growing immiseration for all. However, certain social groups have been particularly vulnerable to impoverishment. These include:

- ◆ households suffering a combination of misfortune, such as harvest failure combined with illness within the family, and poor leadership;
- ◆ pastoral herders who suffered heavy livestock losses in the 1970s and 1980s and have been unable either to restock or gain secure access to land for farming; and
- ◆ those with weak claims to land and those in peri-urban areas who find themselves thrown off their plots as land values rise.

There are also clearly cases where, due to major events such as civil conflict, a large number of people find themselves substantially worse off than before. In the case of Côte

13. Dabiré and Zongo (pers. comm.).



d'Ivoire, the impact of structural adjustment measures, combined with a collapse in world market prices and a breakdown in social and political cohesion, led to a three-fold increase between 1987 and 2002 in those below the poverty line.⁽¹⁴⁾ This period of conflict has brought a rapid downward spiralling in incomes, livelihoods and security for all, except those who have found a new niche in a war-based economy.

IV. GLOBAL INITIATIVES AND PLANS

West African governments have long been subject to the latest donor fads for new plans and strategies, mastering new initiatives from the development community in order to comply with ever-changing conditions for accessing aid. Thus, most countries have shelves laden with National Plans – in the far corner, covered with dust, are those from the early 1980s, such as National Plans to Combat Desertification, Tropical Forest Action Plans and National Environmental Action Plans. Closer to hand are the more recent National Strategies for Sustainable Development, Biodiversity Action Plans and National Action Plans for Adaptation to Climate Change. Now, in pride of place, are Poverty Reduction Strategies, the current requirement for all countries seeking HIPC funding for debt relief.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy process has become a central plank in donor relations with most low-income countries, and constitutes the main framework for discussion of aid priorities and national budgetary allocations. But PRSPs suffer serious weaknesses, which are only gradually being addressed. Almost all strategies refer to the rural poor as a homogenous group, failing to recognize their considerable heterogeneity. Little information is provided on important factors underlying rural poverty, such as access to land and discrimination based on ethnicity or gender. There are also major gaps in understanding rural poverty.⁽¹⁵⁾ Most poverty reduction strategies also provide little attention to productive sectors of the economy

14. Losch, B et al. (2003), *Le processus de libéralisation et la crise ivoirienne*, CIRAD/DIAL, Montpellier, France.
 15. Proctor, F (2002), "PRSP and rural development: reflections, experiences to date and implications", *European Forum on Rural Development Cooperation Montpellier*, September; also Bourn, D (editor) (2003), "Are PRSPs making a difference? The African experience", *Development Policy Review* Vol 21, No 2, March.

Box 7.2: What makes for successful local management of key resources?

Including all actors and building platforms for negotiation are key elements for success

Kishi Beiga is a vast pastoral zone in Oudalan Province in northern Burkina Faso, and is home to several ethnic groups living in scattered villages and hamlets. The local population is joined regularly by transhumant herders from neighbouring regions. Environmental degradation in the area and extensive in-migration have largely destroyed the complementarity between agriculture and livestock production, and the two systems now compete for land. The GTZ-supported Burkina Sahel Programme (PSB) was initiated in 1991 to improve natural resource management and people's livelihoods. The project initially followed a participatory, community-based land use planning approach (*gestion des terroirs*), but found it inadequate to deal with the social and ecological complexities of the region.

Transhumant pastoralists were not represented, social relations between groups were affecting project outcomes in a way that project staff were unable to understand, and the management of common-pool assets was problematic.

Activities were put "on hold" for a year while the project approach and methodology were reviewed and a new strategy developed that focused on social groups rather than on territorial units. With conflicts and rivalries simmering between almost every ethnic group in Beiga, the challenge was to create a situation in which all stakeholders would not only agree to participate in the consultative process but also to respect each other's rights to voice their needs and

feelings. A consultative committee emerged, with representation from multiple villages, hamlets and other stakeholder groups. It has been instrumental in resolving disputes over management of water pumps, which had soured relationships between the groups, and has set up a system for resolving disputes over damage to fields. Negotiating skills are the key to greater autonomy for the committee, and the expertise gained through its dealings with technical and financial partners has enabled it to mobilize resources for micro-projects on socioeconomic issues and the protection of natural resources. In its first year, the committee drew up a set of rules for the use of resources such as post-harvest grazing, bouli (man-made water holes), salt licks, and for the protection of trees and natural water points. So-called "outpost committees" and representatives from each hamlet are responsible for following up and enforcing regulations.

The new approach acknowledged the local tensions and rivalries and other historic origins. Successive political regimes, local power structures and land tenure policies have shaped social relationships within the region, frequently exacerbating conflicts and rivalries. The willingness of people to confront the underlying historical, social and cultural factors in current resource use and management practices was an important factor contributing to the success of the consultative process. Other factors include finding appropriate entry points for discussion, building partnerships and supporting legitimate local leaders and resource people. The PSB offers an example of good practice in an externally facilitated approach to pastoral land tenure and

(especially agriculture), and neglect constraints at international and global levels, which hinder more productive and sustainable livelihoods for poor people.

All these plans have been notable for their lack of impact, having often been drawn up by consultants with little or no buy-in from government, or seen only as a vehicle to raise funds for a particular minister. These planning processes have also failed to link their objectives with budgetary allocations and with what is actually feasible on the ground. Such persistent problems are generally recognized. Indeed, the question of how to bridge the top-down and bottom-up

resource access that tries to deal with social diversity and complexity, typical of the Sahel, through establishing platforms for negotiation and consultation. Future challenges lie in strengthening the fragile cohesion between different groups, and in legally ratifying the consultative committee and management rules it has devised. At the same time, it is recognized that the success of local pilot initiatives remains critically dependent on stability within the wider socio-political environment.

Decentralizing management of grazing and woodland resources is a critical factor

The Takiéta Forest Reserve is situated 50 kilometres west of Zinder in Niger, and covers 6,720 hectares, in a semi-arid region with an average of 250–400 millimetres of rainfall per year. The forest area is considered of enormous importance for many different user groups, including pastoralists, as it represents the one non-cultivated area surrounded by an ocean of fields. The forest has been subject to heavy and unregulated use, such that its degradation has become apparent to all.

The Takiéta Joint Forest Management project was set up in 1995 by SOS Sahel, at the request of the Government of Niger. Its overall objective is to promote a process leading to local sustainable decentralized management of the Takiéta Forest Reserve, taking into account all the different user

groups, and which might inform similar initiatives elsewhere. The project's main role has been one of facilitation, by which over the last five years, the various stakeholders in the forest have been brought together to agree on an inclusive forest management plan and process for decision-making.

Key elements in the approach followed at Takiéta have been:

- ◆ establishing the forest boundaries;
- ◆ resolving questions of illegal settlement within the reserve;
- ◆ starting a dialogue with all user groups
- ◆ presentation and discussion of plans with government; and
- ◆ reaching consensus on a management strategy and set of bylaws.

All activities have been undertaken with local people as the chief actors. Thus, for example, the inventory of soils, pasture and tree cover was carried out using local terms and forms of description. Similarly, regulations for guiding use of the forest have been drawn up on the basis of what different groups could agree to, rather than following the terms of the Forestry Code. Attention has also been paid to maintaining good communication between the various groups, providing information from and possibilities to visit other joint management schemes, and holding workshops at which all actors are represented.

SOURCES: For the first case study: Banzharf, M, B Drabo and H Grell (2000), *From Conflict to Consensus: Towards Joint Management of Natural Resources by Pastoralists and Agro-Pastoralists in the Zone of Kishi Beiga, Burkina Faso*, Securing the Commons No. 3, IIED and SOS Sahel, London; for the second: Vogt, G and K Vogt (2000) *Hannu Biyu Ke Tchuda Juna – Strength in unity. Shared management of common property resources – A case study from Takiéta, Niger*. Securing the Commons No. 2, IIED, London.

approach has long been on the donor agenda. But people do not know how to construct this bridge and, despite recognizing that top-down plans do not work, donors continue to push for this approach, *faute de mieux*.

Local level approaches may offer greater hope, especially as a means of undertaking joint planning and management of land and local resources. Examples of recent approaches include the *Développement Local and Gestion des Terroirs* (GTV) projects in the early 1990s in the Sahel, which aimed to develop through participatory processes a mapping of village lands and a setting of priorities for collective



“Many countries are now pursuing a more formal process of decentralization, which should provide for institutional and legal structures within which local initiatives and planning processes are encouraged”

investments. Typical outcomes have involved watershed protection, soil and water conservation structures, cereal banks, and micro-credit systems. More recently, a series of local natural resource management agreements have evolved regarding woodland, wetland and grazing land areas. Known as *conventions locales*, they provide formal recognition of rights to control and manage a certain resource.⁽¹⁶⁾ In several countries, national legislation is now being drawn up to provide a legal basis for such agreements. Examples include Kishi Beiga grazing lands in northern Burkina Faso and Takiéta woodlands in Niger, as shown in Box 7.2. These local agreements can work well when certain conditions hold – such as effective representation of different stakeholders and interests; the resource in question being sufficiently valuable for people to gain benefit from investing in making its management more sustainable; and local and national government being able to provide proper support and ensure a transfer of rights as well as responsibilities.

This mushrooming of local-level activity has often been supported by NGOs and donor projects. National governments have played a largely benign role, by default, as long as the resources are not too valuable or do not interest a politically important individual. Many countries are now pursuing a more formal process of decentralization, which should provide for institutional and legal structures within which local initiatives and planning processes are encouraged. Many people see decentralization as providing the essential way forward, opening up much greater possibilities for local democracy, participation and harnessing of local energies and resources. Others are more sanguine regarding the degree to which decentralization will, in practice, transfer real powers from central government to lower levels.

Regardless of the debate over decentralization, such an

16. Hilhorst, T and N Coulibaly (1998), “Une convention locale pour la gestion participative de la brousse au Mali”, Drylands Programme Issue Paper No 78, IIED, London; also Dème, Y (1998), “Associations locales de gestion des ressources naturelles du Kelka, Mali”, Drylands Programme Issue Paper No 74, IIED, London; and Alden-Wily, L (2001), “Making woodland management more democratic: cases from Eastern and Southern Africa”, Drylands Programme Issue Paper No 99, IIED, London.



approach will have to be the principal focus for getting real progress on many of the MDGs. But its not the only focus. As the discussion below makes clear, if West African farmers are to “grow their way out of poverty”, action is needed at many levels – global, regional, national and local.

V. A PRACTICAL ILLUSTRATION OF CONSTRAINTS ON LIVELIHOODS

Let us take a farming family in southern Mali, to explore what needs to be done at different levels to improve livelihood opportunities. As with so many families in West Africa, people rely on multiple sources of income, typically, one-third from farming, one-third from migration and one-third from various other forms of income generation, including trade, hunting and gathering, craft work and various services. Better-off households have been investing systematically in urban areas, such as buying a small store or land on which they hope to build a house, establishing a trading business or buying a means of transport – motorbike, lorry, tractor – to bring people and goods from market to village.

What actions might make the incomes of farming households in southern Mali more secure?

- ◆ **globally:** to curb adverse impacts from subsidies paid to farmers in high-income nations, especially cotton producers; improve market access for processed raw materials; and address heightened risks of climatic variability;
- ◆ **regionally:** to facilitate movement of people and goods throughout the West African region;
- ◆ **nationally:** to promote agricultural development, curb imports of cheap foodstuffs, which destroy markets for local food producers, and strengthen decentralized government; and
- ◆ **locally:** to encourage a fair and accountable system of local government, able to respond to diverse interest groups and manage collective resources.

“If West African farmers are to ‘grow their way out of poverty’, action is needed at many levels – global, regional, national and local”



“West African cotton producers have been badly hit, since there is no system of subsidies to protect farmers from such an adverse shift in world market prices”

Global action over cotton. Cotton is the principal cash crop for farmers in southern Mali, grown in rotation with cereals. Its sale is the principal means of financing the purchase of fertilizers for maintaining soil fertility in combination with organic matter and cattle manure. It provides a reasonably sustainable farming system, which has seen substantial gains in the last decade due to better prices and rising yields in many areas. Farmers are well organized and politically astute, as was seen by the cotton farmers’ strike in 2000–01, when farmers refused to plant cotton, in response to government plans to cut the purchase price offered to farmers by the state marketing board. The result was a halving of the cotton harvest in that year, and an improved offer from government for the following year’s cotton price. Cash income from cotton is a major source of income for maintaining farm and household assets.

Cotton farmers are strongly affected by world market prices for cotton. World cotton prices are currently at their lowest levels for 30 years, at half the long-term average. This is the result of a large global harvest, generated in part by high subsidies paid to farmers in rich countries, combined with low levels of demand. Farmers in the US and the European Union are protected from this price slump by high levels of producer support in the form of subsidies. By contrast, major losses in incomes and revenues have been felt by many low-income country farmers. West African cotton producers have been badly hit, since there is no system of subsidies to protect farmers from such an adverse shift in world market prices.

The West African cotton initiative established by four countries in the region – Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad – is asking for cuts in subsidies to cotton farmers in high-income nations in the medium term and compensation for the collapse in world market prices in the immediate term. The dismissive treatment of this initiative at Cancun demonstrates only too clearly the attitude of rich countries towards the priorities of low- and middle-income countries, and leads one to doubt the sincerity of rich nations to help



achieve the MDGs. The Bush administration, in the year before the next US presidential election, seems unable to afford to alienate any possible voters, and appears unmoved by any of the arguments for why their farm subsidies should be cut. Their attitude has been that West African farmers should be the ones to adjust, by diversifying into other crops. The many millions of smallholder farmers of West Africa and their governments depend greatly on cotton for essential revenue with which to pay their bills. Rich country attitudes, in the case of cotton, suggest that promoting action towards meeting the MDGs will be highly conditional on whether this fits with their domestic agenda. In any choice between global justice and shoring up political support in their own country, the latter consideration is likely to prevail.

Regional initiatives. West Africa is a large and complex mosaic of cultures and ecologies, divided by history into 17 different countries. But such boundaries are not watertight. Regional migration is a major means of income-earning, pursued not just in years of crisis but also to develop a broader, more resilient portfolio of activities. Successful West African households may have family members stretched all over the region, as well as other parts of the world, in education and business, as farmers and wage labourers. Remittances from such activities provide an important source of income for those back home. For many farmers in southern Mali, the economic opportunities available in neighbouring Côte d'Ivoire have been of enormous attraction. From the 1950s onwards, families have been establishing plantations of coffee and cocoa in the forest areas of the country. In many of these areas, there have been so many incomers that local people are now a small minority of the population in their home village.

With the crisis in the Ivorian economy from the late 1980s, political rivalries have accentuated. Tensions over land rights between incomers and local people have played an important part in aggravating the political conflicts. The consequences of the civil war are many and multiple, with

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“Finding ways to ease the tensions between different groups in Côte d’Ivoire, and re-establish a broad-based government is a high priority for the region as a whole”

substantial impacts particularly on neighbours Burkina Faso and Mali. Farming households in southern Mali can no longer count on the profits from cocoa and coffee cultivation to help cushion income losses from elsewhere. Thus, finding ways to ease the tensions between different groups in Côte d’Ivoire, and re-establish a broad-based government is a high priority for the region as a whole. As West Africa’s economic powerhouse, the prolonged crisis is wreaking serious damage on prospects for growth and development in the region as a whole.

National policy and practice. There are many important opportunities at national level to promote improved livelihood options in ways which help the country move towards fulfilment of the MDGs, such as in allocation of government budgets as they relate to water provision, education and health. There are also many areas of policy with significant distributional implications, such as agriculture, infrastructural development and credit provision. In addition, there are questions of governance and institutional development that government and civil society need to consider and for which donors could provide valuable support.

Promoting agricultural development

Many governments in West Africa are keen to modernize their agricultural sector, and are developing strategies to achieve improvements in yields, marketing and export revenue. Much recent debate has questioned what is meant by “modernization”, a term that has been interpreted in diverse ways, depending on context, but which tends to translate into:

- ◆ the establishment of land tenure legislation to support private property, through titling of land, and associated measures to increase the volume and security of transactions in land;
- ◆ an increase in the size of agricultural land holdings through the allocation of concessions to large-scale



commercial farmers, and associated preferential access to inputs, credit, equipment, etc.; and

- ◆ a decrease in the number of very small farm holdings and associated population, as the modernization process develops.

Governments tend to think that development of a modern agricultural sector demands a scaling up in size of farm, and that smallholders should leave the land. However, the evidence available shows that this is a mistaken view. A substantial body of research shows that productivity, taken as output per hectare, is higher on small than on large farms. This inverse relationship between farm size and productivity is the result of several factors. Small farms rely much more on family labour, which tends to require much less supervision than hired workers. Where land is in short supply and rising in value, it makes sense to invest in its improvement and maximize returns to this factor. Having a diverse income base, smallholder farms are more resilient to risks, while their partial subsistence base also provides some cushioning in cases of price shocks.

Although there may be very limited economies of scale in farm production, there are rising costs upstream and downstream from farm production that make it increasingly difficult for smallholders to survive. For example, commodity buyers prefer to deal with a few large producers rather than with many smaller-scale farms, since the latter bring with them higher transaction costs. Equally, larger farmers can often gain preferential access to land, inputs and credit, due to their political power.

Current debate regarding the future of agriculture in West Africa has focused on the choice between family farming and agribusiness. The first is often presented as backward, inefficient and subsistence-oriented, while the second is attributed the virtues of being modern and forward-looking, efficient and market-oriented. Yet, in practice, such distinctions are false, with levels of performance being largely the product of external conditions and incentives.

“Having a diverse income base, smallholder farms are more resilient to risks, while their partial subsistence base also provides some cushioning in cases of price shocks”



“Small-scale family farms maintain a degree of autonomy which allows them to cope with adverse circumstances, while family labour enables a rapid and flexible response to emerging economic opportunities”

Large-scale commercial farming is itself highly differentiated, with a range of strategies being pursued. Some large farmers are seriously engaged in running a profitable business while, for others, the receipt of preferential inputs and access to credit may be a prime motive. Equally, some “large farmers” are more interested in acquiring claims over land for speculative, rather than productive, purposes. Many examples show that these farms have suffered damaging reversals when government preferences are withdrawn, and access to inputs and foreign exchange becomes harder. By contrast, small-scale family farms maintain a degree of autonomy which allows them to cope with adverse circumstances, while family labour enables a rapid and flexible response to emerging economic opportunities. There are also distinct differences within the family farm sector between large, adaptable farm households, and small, highly vulnerable groups with few assets or capacities to cope with change.

Material in Box 7.3 shows the recent dismal performance of agribusiness in Ghana and Nigeria, where government has tried to encourage foreign firms to invest in agriculture.

The examples in Box 7.3 confirm parallel evidence regarding the difficulties faced by large commercial farm enterprises, as in the case of Senegal.⁽¹⁷⁾ Here, considerable areas of land were allocated to applicants seeking big holdings, who relied on access to cheap credit to develop and work the land. The devaluation of the West African franc (FCFA) in 1994, combined with market liberalization and restrictions on credit, led to the collapse of many commercial farms, who were unable to compete with smallholders and imports of cheap rice. By contrast, family farms have been able to adapt and intensify, using cheap labour in preference to costly credit and machinery. A recent survey of “new agriculturalists” in Burkina Faso also suggests that the large farms being established in the south and west of the country have low yields and poor performance in

17. Belières, J-F et al. (2002), “What future for West Africa’s family farms in the world economy?”, Drylands Programme Issue Paper No 113, IIED, London.

Box 7.3: Private sector investment in large farms – a dismal story

Many transnational companies with operations in Ghana had accumulated profits in the 1970s from their activities, but were unable to transfer them abroad due to shortages of foreign exchange. It was hoped that their investment in joint private–state farming enterprises would increase agro-industrial activity. The government guaranteed access to land, social infrastructure and tax exemptions for equipment and other inputs. However, only 12 companies were in fact willing to take up these schemes, with four of these still in business in the late 1980s; failures having been due to litigation relating to land, and poor access to foreign exchange for imports of inputs. Nevertheless, the scale of land appropriation for some of these schemes was very considerable, with the Benso Oil Palm Plantation taking 27 square miles of land, displacing 3,000 peasant farmers. The expansion of oil palm production and expropriation of land for the Ghana Oil Palm Development Corporation (GOPDC) has resulted in a scarcity of land for many farmers and for food production. With few opportunities in agriculture, many youths are moving into informal sectors that are being criminalized by the state, such as chainsaw timber production and small-scale mining, and engaging in activities which involve pilfering, such as night-time harvesting from the GOPDC oil palm plantations. These activities reflect the recognition amongst rural dwellers that state policies are not in their interests nor administered on their behalf.

The Nigeria indigenization decrees passed in the 1970s obliged foreign firms to re-invest

profits in the Nigerian economy. The Land Use Act of 1978 was also designed as a means of freeing up land from customary claims for allocation to modern agribusiness. Land was nationalized and long-term leases put into place, with customary owners ceding rights for up to 99 years. Numerous interests started looking for land: politicians, army personnel, the United Africa Company (UAC), civil servants, various churches, etc. Structural adjustment in 1985 brought a ban on imports of wheat, barley and other ingredients for brewing and animal feed, so companies sought regular sources of supply through developing their own farms. For example, UAC and Leventis set up their own farming ventures for sourcing needed inputs. The Texaco farm in Ogun State covered a total of 3,886 acres, having been set up in 1975 as a means of using oil profits. However, it closed in 1987, due to economic difficulties and financial irregularities. It focused on cassava production and also provided a site for experimentation with new varieties generated by the neighbouring IITA research centre. A factory was built on-site to process cassava into flour, using mainly women workers. But it was very difficult to run the business at a profit, due to strong competition for wage labour from local farmers, and volatile prices for the processed gari. The devaluation of the currency took a further turn in 1986, making imported inputs prohibitively expensive. Vertical integration of these farms means they operate as enclaves within rural areas and have few linkages to the local economy, apart from employing a certain number of workers and land acquisition.

SOURCE: Amanor, K (1999) *Global Restructuring and Land Rights in Ghana*, Research Report no. 108, Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, Uppsala, Sweden; Guyer, J (1997), *An African Niche Economy: farming to feed Ibadan 1968–88*, Edinburgh University Press.

comparison with neighbouring peasant farms.⁽¹⁸⁾

Supporting rural livelihoods

Recent research on what makes for a sustainable rural livelihood in Mali⁽¹⁹⁾ identified a number of critical issues:

18. Ouédraogo, M (2003), "New stakeholders and the promotion of agro-silvo-pastoral activities in Southern Burkina Faso: false start or inexperience?", *Drylands Issue Paper No 118*, IIED, London.
19. Brock and Coulibaly (1999), *op. cit.*



“The large extended household remains a centrally important institution within which a diverse set of activities is carried out, capital and assets are mobilized and risks are pooled”

the role of the family as an institution of great value for pooling resources and risks; systems of local governance for managing resources and the provision of services; and assuring secure rights of access to land.

Local institutions are many and diverse, ranging from the various family structures within which people live, to kin or village-based collective work groups, to more formal structures, including farmers’ unions, credit and savings groups, and village-based groups for managing collective property, such as an irrigation scheme or neighbouring woodland. The large extended household remains a centrally important institution within which a diverse set of activities is carried out, capital and assets are mobilized and risks are pooled. When managed well, such domestic structures provide a remarkable framework within which people can negotiate a degree of independence and possibilities for accumulating their own assets. However, this requires a judicious balancing of private and collective rights and duties. The frequency with which households break up suggests that not everyone can master these tensions to good effect. Marriage networks are also important institutions through which support and mutual help are mobilized in times of need. While it is easy to demonstrate the vitally important role played by such institutions in helping people to cope with risky and uncertain circumstances, it is less clear what, if anything, government might do to strengthen such social relations structures.

Perhaps the greatest potential opportunity for support to local institutions is for government to recognize the legal status and rights of **local associations** for managing particular resources, such as woodlands and grazing. Here, government can help set the rules by which such structures should operate, in terms of their representation of different interests, and offer legal protection through drawing up legislation to recognize and protect local rights and powers over resources (Box 7.2). Equally, they should clarify the relations between such local associations and district level structures of government.



Securing rights to land is crucial to the livelihoods of poorer groups. In many parts of West Africa, people see land as increasingly becoming scarce, and most markedly in peri-urban areas where land values are rising rapidly. Many West African land systems can be characterized by the term “legal pluralism”, denoting the multiple norms and channels through which claims to land can be made, leading to a degree of uncertainty and indeterminacy in cases of dispute. Different claimants to land assert their particular rights to control this resource, bringing evidence from statutory law or customary practice to support their case. Contradictions between such bodies of law and practice further generate tensions and conflict. Inevitably, as land becomes scarcer, it is likely that poorer groups will lose out. This may be aggravated by government or donor-led programmes to register or title land, unless great attention is paid to the potential adverse impacts on more vulnerable rights holders. These typically include the poor and secondary rights holders (often women and other incomers, such as recent settlers, migrants, seasonal users). The challenge for reform of land tenure and administration is how best to formalize land rights, through some form of registration, while not at the same time alienating the rights of the more insecure members of the population. Establishing a locally based structure for registering and administering land rights is a key element, but such local structures also need to be held accountable for the different interests in land.⁽²⁰⁾ Hence, getting effective local governance of such structures will be essential.

Making decentralization work

Many countries, particularly in West Africa, are undertaking reforms aimed at decentralization of certain administrative and other government functions, following a variety of different models. These processes are at various stages across the region, some having started long ago, while

“The challenge for reform of land tenure and administration is how best to formalize land rights, through some form of registration, while not at the same time alienating the rights of the more insecure members of the population”

20. Ribot, Jesse (2002b), *Democratic Decentralization of Natural Resources: Institutionalizing Popular Participation*, World Resources Institute, Washington DC; also Toulmin, C (2000), “Decentralization”, in Toulmin, C and J Quan (editors), *Evolving Land Rights, Policy and Tenure in Africa*, IIED, DFID, NRI, London.



“In deciding the appropriate level at which to undertake certain tasks, thought needs to be given to questions of cost, efficiency, accountability and oversight by higher levels of government”

others are still in the pipeline. They usually involve the establishment of elected local councils or district assemblies, often for the first time. They have varying powers to levy taxes and derive revenue from local resources. Typically, they can raise revenue from the allocation of permits, while being responsible for local development plans and service provision. Elected every four to five years, usually on a political party basis, it is hoped that this form of local government will bring greater accountability with regard to local people, who will be better able to monitor how their tax revenues are being used for the provision of local services. However, many local councils have an extremely weak tax base and are highly reliant on central government for sources of revenue.

The impacts and consequences of current decentralization measures vary greatly depending on the extent to which these new forms of local government can acquire a sense of legitimacy vis-à-vis local people and other sources of local governance (such as customary chiefs). Their performance depends also on how far central government supports the process in practice, as well as the extent to which they can actually carry out the activities hoped of them.

Decentralization is a relatively recent policy shift, undertaken by many countries only in the late 1980s and 1990s. This means that it may take more than just a few years to start to see any significant impacts from these institutional changes.

Decentralization has been seen by many as providing a valuable framework within which to establish more effective local governance. The setting up of elected local councils is a step forward in devolving powers and decision-making away from central government, and in encouraging a more locally tailored approach to policy-making. However, for those at village-level, the establishment of local councils with powers over land and other resources can represent a centralization of power away from village hands. In deciding the appropriate level at which to undertake certain tasks, thought needs to be given to questions of cost, efficiency, accountability and oversight by higher levels of



government. On questions relating to land, there are strong grounds to argue in favour of a very localized approach, given the likelihood that knowledge of often complex rights over land is most likely to be held at village level. The question then remains of how higher-level structures of government can best support such a community-based approach, the principles that must guide the work of the village level committee, and the training support required to ensure effective management of records. Equally, some means must be found of ensuring checks and balances on such a local management system, to avoid abuses of power.

Decentralization has also generated a series of critical observations in terms of how it has been carried out and of the over-optimistic assumptions regarding accountability of elected officials to local constituencies. In many places, setting up a new local government structure has added to the confusion created by multiple and contested sources of authority, especially between local chiefs, and the elected district assembly. There is very limited availability of human and financial resources to enable activity at local level. Some local government areas are lucky enough to have revenue-generating resources from which to raise money, but many do not. There are risks of élite capture of local processes, as well as political manipulation of local affairs by central political parties. The hoped-for accountability to local people may be very limited in practice, with elected officials looking up towards their political paymasters rather than down towards the people who elected them.

Despite such drawbacks, decentralization is here to stay. The key issue is how government and donors might better support such processes, address problems and encourage increased engagement from grassroots organizations. This means finding ways to strengthen local democratic systems, and finding ways to have checks and balances on local government structures, since all systems of government are susceptible to abuses of power, corruption and fraud.

Recent work by IIED and partners in Senegal and Mali on participatory monitoring of decentralization provides one

“The key issue is how government and donors might better support processes of decentralisation, and address problems and encourage increased engagement from grassroots organizations”



“While it makes sense to deliver some aid through macro-level measures, this is only half the story. A series of local-level activities are needed to complement this approach”

means to identify expectations among local people of what local government should deliver, and how these might be measured. Local people need to define indicators which make sense for them, and which can be “measured” in terms that are feasible. In the case of Takiéta (Box 7.2), this community woodland management system developed their own set of variables to monitor the changing status of vegetation, levels of degradation and recovery, and viable levels of harvested offtake.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Let us assume that there is total commitment from the world community to achieving the MDGs, an assumption which may be over-optimistic in current circumstances. But let us imagine for a moment a beneficent set of world leaders who really care about making life better for poorer people around the world. How would they do it? Is it just a question of throwing more money at the delivery of services, and better linking of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers with the Medium Term Expenditure Frameworks? Or will it demand rather more deep-seated changes at all levels? Is it already too late to achieve the MDGs in many places because the level and rate of improvement over the next 10–12 years is clearly unattainable? Might the risk of not attaining the MDGs in the case of sub-Saharan Africa spur a renewed sense of urgency and reflection on priorities?

If the MDGs are to be delivered, there are real structures and institutions at different levels through which different actors must work to help shift powers, responsibilities, resources and activities in the right direction. This will imply changes to many aspects of government and donor behaviour. For example, how should donors deliver aid? Many have moved largely to budgetary support and abandoned more direct forms of intervention. While it makes sense to deliver some aid through macro-level measures, this is only half the story. A series of local-level activities are needed to complement this approach. What



intermediaries or brokers are required to make this happen? Non-governmental and civil society actors have a major role here. But most agencies have shed many staff who had field-level knowledge, and focus on “strategic” issues instead. This makes it hard for them to comprehend the ordinary experiences of daily life for millions of people in poor countries. How can donors strengthen effective local processes in such a case?

Past experience throughout West Africa with top-down centralized approaches to planning, service provision and land management have failed. Despite the challenges, a local level approach is the only feasible way forward in achieving the MDGs. But it requires firm commitment from national government and donor partners over a considerable period (ten years or more), to build the skills, institutions, values and civil society structures essential to making local governance accountable and effective.

