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# ACORD's experience in local planning in Mali and Burkina Faso

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### • Introduction

In Mali and Burkina Faso ACORD has attempted, through a variety of support to informal and formal groups, to reinforce the participation of non-governmental structures in local planning mechanisms. In both cases collaboration with governmental technical services and planning bodies was seen as essential to this process, though problematic. This abstract will attempt to draw some tentative conclusions from this experience relating particularly to the NGO/state relationship.

### • Mali

In Mali ACORD initially supported formal state-inspired cooperatives which enabled its programme of activities to insert itself in a non-confrontational manner into the government's planning strategy for rural areas. However it was apparent that the majority of the co-operatives were not representative of their members and those that were to some degree, had little influence on regional development planning. ACORD therefore shifted its support to more informal groups (producer/marketing/women's groups) and encouraged an on-going process of decentralisation of what were very large cooperative structures. This change whilst permitting ACORD to work with emergent indigenous groups, rather than artificial externally created ones, posed two major problems. The first was that despite this approach being in line with government policy, which was based on drawing together village level projects which were then to be considered by the government Local

Development Committees (LDCs), in practice such poorly resourced structures had great difficulty in coordinating and planning such a multitude of micro-projects. The second problem was that the majority of these groups did not have the economic and thus political clout to make their voice heard at the level of the LDCs.

In the long term the programme aims to reinforce the capacity of the groups to play a greater role at the level of the LDCs by encouraging, but not imposing, unions and federations (similar ACORD experiences in the Sahel zone of Burkina Faso proving relatively successful). However in the short term ACORD, in order to create the space to achieve this, is obliged to work at several levels simultaneously:

- with specific interest groups at the micro-level;
- with spontaneous alliances of such groups for specific activities (e.g. marketing);
- with local NGOs offering similar support;
- with LDCs at 'arrondissement', 'cercle' and regional levels;
- with regional technical services (livestock, agriculture, cooperative action etc.); and,
- with ministries at the national level.

The complexity of the management that this demands is evident and it necessarily limits the amount of work that can be done at the micro-level. ACORD has therefore tended to concentrate its activities geographically. It is felt that if the programme is to surpass a simple juxtaposition of micro-projects, if it is going to produce some sustainable changes to local-level planning and if it is to help in the consciousness-raising and training process at the level of governmental structures (as well as

proposing possible new ways of participatory planning), then it has to limit itself in this way.

One of the major ways that a greater participation of rural groups in local planning has been attempted is the establishment of an 'auto-evaluation' mechanism. This methodology was developed after an evaluation of the programme in 1987 with the help of IMRAD (Institut Malien de Recherches Appliquees au Development) and IRAM (Institut de Recherche et d'application des Methodes de Development). The evaluation highlighted the need to find more effective ways of working with grass-roots groups other than through the formal cooperatives structure. Through discussions with informal village groups and state structures a systematic approach has been adopted.

The ACORD teams were trained in the GRAAP animation methodology (see below), and with the assistance of a local artist generated pictures which corresponded with the reality in the programme areas. The teams visit villages to begin an animation phase, and collect information on the conditions of that group or village e.g. population, calendar of activities, environmental, economic and social conditions. This constitutes a group 'fiche' or file for baseline information. The group or village divides into sub-groups according to age and sex to discuss their problems. With the assistance of an animator a full village meeting then listens to the problems of each sub-group and tries to agree on a common priority to all. This discussion leads to an idea for a project they wish to initiate. Another file a 'fiche-action' is drawn up with details of the activity, and the support they will need from ACORD. This takes the form of a contract, where ACORD and the group agree on certain commitments. At this stage the group is asked how they will evaluate the proposed activity. The team helps the group to discuss various indicators: social, economic, technical and organisational. These indicators are combined with ACORD's criteria to form an overall evaluation framework. A permanent record of the expected results, criteria and indicators is left with the group. A 'fiche de suivi' is then created and any visit by ACORD or local government service is recorded with details of the activity, advice or further commitment.

An evaluation is carried out by the community and ACORD at the completion of a particular activity. The monitoring and evaluation at the group and ACORD level is undertaken with the assistance of the local research institute (IMRAD). This process is finally supplemented by a third level of external evaluation by local technical services, Local Development Committees, or donors. This would be carried out at the end of a programme funding period.

An interesting example of the process concerns a project of riverine fodder-crop (Panicum bourgou) regeneration along the Niger river. It had been assumed by most people (particularly the technical services working in the area and external aid agencies) that the primary reason that groups were interested in this activity was in order to ensure adequate fodder for their animals during the dry season. Whilst this was true for many individuals, discussions with women established that they would judge the success of this activity on the amount of 'Kundou' (a sweet drink made from this grass) that their children would drink during the year. Further discussion revealed this criterion for success was a single indicator that allowed rapid appraisal of several aspects of the project, as if the 'Kundou' had been made available to the children it would indicate that there had been enough to satisfy the needs of the animals.

This also indicated the different priorities between men (whose evaluation criteria was "if we can offer you some milk in March when you return then the activity will have been successful") and women, and between women who owned livestock and those who did not, given to the activity itself. A further lesson that the exercise of 'auto-evaluation' gave was the very difference within household relations that existed particularly between pastoral groups. These differences often depend on the levels of sedentarisation of the groups and the social origins of the household (i.e. noble, vassal or marabout). The replicability therefore of analyses of within household relations and evaluation criteria needed to be tempered by such factors. One of the main differences is between female headed households and male headed households.

## Discussion

The strength of this methodology is that the concept of auto-evaluation is integrated into the team's approach and work from the beginning thus lessening the danger of external criteria being imposed. The focus on auto-evaluation also acts as a 'reflection period' for groups to establish a deeper analysis. This assists needs-identification and an examination of the group's own expectations in the light of external assistance. The use of sub-groups enables the views of marginalised groups, e.g. women, to be highlighted rather than subsumed within the overall needs of the village. This has revealed inter and intra-household differences in the objectives for certain activities and in the criteria for success.

Some technical and local government personnel were involved in the initial training, given the need to continue communication with technical services and the Local Development Committees (LDCs). The identification of new activities or villages to work has to be approved by the LDCs and should take into consideration local plans and regional planning policy. It is, however, not yet clear whether the LDCs could act as the mechanism whereby the needs identification carried out by village groups and ACORD are really reflected in the formulation of regional policy. Such structures do, in theory, have this potential and it is therefore important to attempt to influence them and thus bring some coherence to what would otherwise be a programme of dispersed and uncoordinated micro-activities.

The creation of the 'fiche action' and 'fiche de suivi' provide for:

- the creation of a baseline for monitoring and evaluation using criteria set down by the groups;
- a systematic method for the on-going collection of information; and,
- a management framework to assist the participatory process.

The programmes have come up against various constraints in the implementation of the methodology:

- the 'fiche' are completed by the team members as they require a considerable level of literacy. Diagrams, pictures and maps could perhaps be used not only as an animation technique, but also as a way to leave a permanent record of the group's analysis which is accessible to non-literate members of the village.
- staff have a heavy paperwork load to keep all the 'fiche' up-to-date, but this is essential as a monitoring tool.

The annual support mission of IMRAD in 1989 raised the following points:

- That although the communities had been capable of analysing and fixing objectives for technical and economic factors relating to activities it was much more difficult for them to articulate (or for ACORD to understand) their analysis on social factors or secondary or unexpected effects of the activities.
- That an increased effort should be made in the training of ACORD staff in the utilisation of the auto-evaluation technique and on animation techniques in general. There is still a certain attitude of 'we know best' and a feeling that if something goes wrong it is probably the fault of the community rather than ACORD and its methodology.
- That there was often a large difference between what the local development committees thought people wanted and what they actually wanted. It is important for ACORD not to neglect its role in informing the LDCs of this and discussing and convincing them that there are more suitable means of identifying what the communities actually want.
- That flexibility was vital in the elaboration of 'fiches', they needed to be tested thoroughly amongst a representative sample of groups, the way that questions were asked needed to vary according to the different ethnic and social groupings. Above all it was necessary to remember that the process must adapt over time.

- That over and above the technical difficulty of identifying 'societal projects' is the lack of cohesion within certain groups. This was notably for pastoralists where a certain desire for a form of agropastoralism amongst many can challenge the traditional social hierarchies and power of the few.
- The degree of integration of the ACORD team remained weak. Sectoral technicians were not yet collaborating sufficiently and their role as 'development agents' rather than technical assistants was not yet being fully realised. This posed problems in terms of multi-disciplinary analysis where one activity may provoke a brake on another. For example, by increasing women's labour on rice fields one reduced their market gardening activities, one of their few sources of revenue.

At this stage of the programme it is difficult to determine whether groups are able to carry out the process of needs identification, project planning etc. themselves or whether they are still dependent on ACORD. Do village groups feel that they have to undergo the animation process in order to receive support for a project from ACORD? The feasibility of training village group animators could be explored in addition to the development of funding networks other than ACORD. A time-scale for ACORD's support could also be written into the contract between ACORD and a group. The Mali programmes are working with many ethnic groups and production systems. To date the ACORD team has found that it is easier to work with poorer groups in some villages than others and that work with women has been more successful in some areas. It would be interesting to know whether the auto-evaluation method can be adapted to reflect this.

Relationships between the Mali programme and the state have been more ambiguous than the case of Burkina Faso. At first the Mali programme only worked through state structures and formal cooperatives. A change in policy to become much more of an intermediary between the state and the

population has proved to be a politically difficult step. In Burkina this role was assumed at the outset.

Overall the lessons to date indicate that the relationship of an external agency with resources (whether it is staffed by Malians or not), and local groups will always be artificial and biased. In the long term the programme aims to overcome that by facilitating the emergence of structures that emanate from such groups. In the short term the objective must be to minimise that artificiality whilst recognising its existence. The project has gone some small way to improving the relationship by allowing local groups to have their say and by establishing a link with a local research institute that can provide a continuous and objective 'exterior' appreciation of the programme's work.

## • Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso ACORD has used GRAAP methods in its programme of support to socio-economic village groups. The GRAAP methodology has been developed by the Groupe de Recherche et d'Appui pour l'Autopromotion Paysanne (GRAAP) in Burkina Faso. It aims to assist groups to recognise change as one way to improve their situation. This is achieved through a continuing cycle of analysis, reflection and action. A trained animator encourages this process through posing questions on different themes: the different types of people living in the village; constraints to production; and areas of conflict between groups. These discussion sessions are held in sub-groups and use clear simple pictures to aid visualisation of the issues discussed and the relations between different people or groups of people. An important element of the GRAAP method is the iteration between sub-group sessions and plenaries when the groups come together. This is particularly important to ensure the participation of women and youth. The spokesperson for a group is much more likely to speak up on behalf of a group than on behalf of him/herself. Proverbs, stories and songs are also used. The training helps animators to provide a discussion framework for the role of religion, modern science and indigenous knowledge, inter-generation

conflict, dependency relationships, and the role of an outside catalyst or animator.

The groups ACORD supports were set up with the assistance of extension services but are not government organisations. An initial survey of the village groups showed that projects failed because: villages did not consider the projects as their own, but as externally imposed; that limited management capacity hindered implementation; and that some village groups had internal problems which were further aggravated during project implementation. At the regional level there was no overall policy to tackle the particular needs of the area and few criteria for the establishment of projects. ACORD believed that state structures were sincerely trying to help rural communities, and that instead of by-passing or emphasising the negative aspects of local government, ACORD's strategy should be to support those structures to become more effective e.g. through assistance with planning rather than material resources. Thus the programme aims to support training for animation at several levels:

- trainers/supervisors are trained/upgraded in animation techniques;
- training of extension workers;
- training and refresher courses for officials of rural organisation; and,
- at the village group and village group union level there is assistance to animation sessions (this assistance includes preparing and adaptation of the GRAAP method).

The overall animation objective is the identification of problems, opportunities, misunderstandings, and activities by and with the villagers at the village level. More specific animation focuses on discussion of the solutions which villagers themselves can apply to a problem and the aspects for which some support is deemed necessary. The idea is to work out with them the activities to be undertaken and to demonstrate the need for the organisation to carry out these activities.

It is argued that one of the main constraints to village organisation and management is functional literacy for village group and village group union officials. Programme support to literacy work includes the design of simple management systems in local

languages and training extension workers to improve training and support for village groups.

Lack of funding per se, was not seen as a constraint for effective projects. Instead assistance is provided in project formulation, writing up, presentation and fund-raising. Any financial support is given as loans not grants to ensure that the activity is seen as a village project.

## Discussion

This approach has emphasised the training of existing government extension workers. This has the benefit of sensitising government structures to participatory approaches by fully involving them in that process. The risk of creating a parallel structure is minimised and 'handover' is not required as the project begins to be institutionalised from conception. By using government extension agents this approach is probably more cost effective. However, resources are still necessary for supervisory structures, and logistical support for follow-up.

Some of the drawbacks which the programme has faced include the mobility of staff and the need for training to be put into practice as soon as possible. During the Sankara period relations with the government were good; however since the change of government extension services have had to fund themselves to a greater degree. This means that their priority is to sell inputs to farmers to cover their running costs. As a result, animation work suffers. There is also the problem (from a donor viewpoint) of the lack of visible results, which take longer for a programme of structural support.

Although this programme has a limited 'loan fund' available to pre-finance activities, it does not see its role as providing technical interventions. Assistance with animation training and group sessions is separate from any technical support required for identified activities. The key question is the effectiveness of this approach in actually linking groups with founders and technical assistance.

It has been argued that IGRAAP as a method is too global and is not so useful in addressing

specific village problems. The GRAAP method perhaps works better in situations of crisis where there is rapid change and crises in relations, and where there is a need for conflict resolution. It requires highly skilled and committed animators who already have a good knowledge of the area, power relations, and yet can take an objective view point and act as a mirror for village discussions. The responsibility of the animators is to generate dialogue, encourage reflection and provoke action, it is not to transmit extension messages. The method depends on appropriate pictures which have to be created for each situation. This could be seen as a constraint on the replicability of the method or alternatively as a way of promoting participation in the continuing adaptation and development of the methodology.

The Burkina Faso programme's approach, a combination of the GRAAP method with support to managerial and planning capacity, is tackling the issues of participation at several levels, whilst attempting to avoid a situation where participation at the grass roots is seen as a threat and blocked by local government structures.

Since 1983, this programme has therefore tried to strengthen village groups and encourage links between them whilst at the same time facilitating their access to financial and other support from other agencies. The problem for many founders was their inability to identify suitable groups or projects to support and their capacity to adequately follow-up on what they funded. ACORD, through a process of participatory 'animation' using the locally developed GRAAP methodology and an important training component, managed to build up village portfolios that corresponded to the individual needs of the groups into a coherent regional planning document that allowed founders to invest in the diverse areas of support that were required. This process, apart from reinforcing local planning capacities, succeeded in channelling an average of between £500,000 to £1,000,000 per annum to properly identified projects at a cost of between one quarter and one fifth of the additional funding attracted, thus not only guaranteeing a better utilisation of funds but also increasing the accessibility of such support to many more groups. This experience

indicates the feasibility of strengthening local groups and at the same time coordinating and directing external support to them (although it must be said that the political climate between 1983 and 1988 was particularly favourable to the development of this process).

## • Conclusion

The state is not a monolithic block. There are unique parts of the structure within it with diverse interests and agendas which are committed to the development of the zones in which they work. NGOs need to identify how best they might support but not substitute themselves for what exists. They need to exploit their comparative advantage over the state in terms of the different relationship they can have with intended 'beneficiaries' and their capacity to organise themselves in an appropriate manner, rather than compete.

The questions that remain to be answered are:

- how to achieve the right balance between the support offered at each level?
- how best to influence change without antagonising local government?
- how to retain a degree of independence from the state, whose policies and personnel are liable to change, whilst developing links and mutually beneficial relationships?
- how to ensure that the least powerful or unheard voices (women, minority groups, etc.) are listened to and represented at the local planning level?

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