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Lessons from the 'project centre d'alevinage lagdo' in North Cameroon

Henri Roggeri

The Project 'Centre d'Alevinage Lagdo' (Gounougou, North-Cameroon) aims at mitigating two of the adverse downstream effects of the Lagdo Dam: the decrease in fish production resulting from the absence of yearly floods, and the increase in water-related diseases. This pilot project started in 1987 with the creation of a fish-breeding station for the purpose of restocking remaining wetland patches, thereby introducing fish-culture, and conducting experiments on biological means to control vectors of water-related diseases. During the first implementation phases, the purpose of the project evolved towards the set-up of a water management system at the village level, thus illustrating the adaptation capacity of the project.

This adaptation capacity results from the project's general approach which can be characterised by these two simple statements: one, little is known about the ecological and socio-economic conditions that prevail in the project area (planning process in which 'ignorance' is taken into account) and two, if an action is undertaken, it must be perpetrated by the local population once the project itself is completed (self-help development).

A number of operational principles stemmed from this approach. Among these, the following deserve special attention:

- Take the time to acquire the necessary knowledge on technical and ecological issues, and insight in local socio-cultural and socio-economic conditions. It is only now, after two short phases (1 year each), that a detailed plan of activities is being developed (during a third one-year phase).
- Focus on practical problems, preferably those identified by the local population.

- Incrementally acquire the necessary (technical and ecological) knowledge through action-research in which researchers/extension workers and villagers learn from each others and from the activities carried out.
- The target group has the responsibility of the final decision.

Such an approach clearly requires both the actual participation of the target group and an adequate attitude of the project staff. To this respect, two lessons can already be drawn from the project's experience:

1. In ensuring participation, the organisation of the population is a crucial instrument. In Gounougou, where the population is characterised by ethnic diversity and a high percentage of immigrants, the organisation of villagers involves:
 - the establishment of a forum (weekly village meeting) for discussions on current activities and problems that arise, exchange of information, problem identification, formulation of new ideas (local initiatives that request assistance by the project), permanent evaluation etc.; and,
 - the creation of 'functional groups' consisting of individuals who share the same interests and are involved in a specific activity.

Although these organisational structures are still being built, they already have proved successful in, for instance, providing the project with a valuable insight on some customary rights with respect to resource use, initiating activities

that help meet the actual needs of villagers, cancelling or postponing actions aiming at problems that were not experienced as such by the local population, strengthening relationships between the different groups of resource users, and establishing a close relationship between the villagers and the project.

2. The project staff must remain open to new developments, alert to events and incidents that occur in and around the village, and ready to show interest and provide assistance to unplanned activities. The staff should also constantly question the adequacy of on-going activities with respect to the villagers' needs.

- **Henri Roggeri**, Centre for Environmental Studies, Garen Market 1a, PO Box 9518, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.