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Participating or taking control? An experience in rural planning from Mali

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Paying for the cost of local development is one of the major challenges facing Mali's Rural Councils, and although central government does contribute it is not nearly enough. In the district of Bankass in north-eastern Mali, where I have been working for the past ten years as the coordinator of a SOS Sahel International/GB project, the only potential source of local income for the Rural Council is to tax local people or to levy charges for the use of natural resources such as forests and rangelands that are under their control.¹

The law gives Rural Councils final responsibility for the management of natural resources in their jurisdictions, including the right to charge people for the right to use these resources if they have been 'improved' in some way.² And although the law does state that they have to do this in a consultative way by involving local people and their community-based organisations, the law does not say how exactly this is to be done. There is therefore a danger that Rural Councils could go ahead and develop their areas and impose a taxation system without sufficiently involving local people

or taking into account the longer-term implications of their actions on either the environment or the communities.

The challenges: Why does this matter and what is at stake?

The main issue at stake is local people's livelihoods. The majority of local people are agro-pastoralists and practice a number of additional activities to make ends meet (e.g. seasonal fishing, woodcutting, craftwork), all of which depend on periodic access to farmland, rangeland, and forest products. In order to protect local people's livelihoods, Rural Councils are faced with two major challenges, both of which require them to reconcile short-term political gain with longer-term development objectives. The first challenge is to get council officials to design management plans for the sustainable use of these resources. This requires that they take a long-term view of local development, which goes beyond their three-year mandate, and invest in processes that will not bear fruit for many years. The other challenge is for them to understand and accept that these plans need to be designed in a participatory way with all the people who use and depend on these resources, including those groups who have a low social standing (e.g. women) or who do not live in the area but periodically visit (e.g. mobile pastoral groups). In theory there shouldn't be a problem, but in practice Mayors and their councillors may be tempted to opt for

¹Sustainable Management of Sylvo-Pastoral Resources project. This project carries out training activities to strengthen the capacities of customary and 'modern' community-based organisations better to manage the forest and other natural resources in the area.

²In practice, the central government in Mali has yet to pass the additional laws which will authorise the transfer of these management rights to the Rural Councils.

short-term, quick-fix solutions which will make them popular with the more influential resident population who may then vote them back into office.

These are the challenges that we have been working on in the district of Bankass over the past two or three years. Getting the local government bodies to accept the principle of social inclusion is not easy, but from the outset our approach has been to help the Rural Councils and the local population better understand what it might cost them in the long run if they did exclude certain people. We followed a slow, process-led approach that sought progressively to help Rural Councils to work in a more participatory way with their constituents and other interest groups from other areas of Mali. This process is described below.

The implication process

Figure 1 shows how the project followed an iterative, process-led approach to build the capacity of the Rural Councils in the District of Bankass better to understand the stakes at play in the management of the natural resources under their jurisdiction.

The horizontal axis is a time line showing the start of activities in October 1999 and the situation in May 2002, whereas the vertical axis demonstrates the degree to which the Mayors and their councillors were increasingly involved in the design and implementation of these activities, as well as the degree to which they increasingly involved other actors.

Stage 1

The first activity that the project did was to arrange a meeting with the newly elected Mayors and their councillors to explain to them the work of SOS Sahel. The main outcome of the meeting was a request for training in what the laws of the land said about who was responsible for the management of natural resources.

Stage 2

After the initial meeting, SOS Sahel organised a conventional training workshop for the Mayors and their councillors at which the various laws regulating natural resources were presented and discussed. A key outcome of this workshop was the realisation by the Rural Councils of the need to organise a regional conference on the topic of natural resource management, which would bring together all major stakeholders.

Stage 3

Soon after this training workshop, the Rural Councils in the district of Bankass were invited by a neighbouring district to participate in a regional meeting to decide how best to

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organise the seasonal transhumance of livestock between their respective areas. The project decided that its most effective contribution would be to help the Rural Councils from the district of Bankass to prepare for this important meeting by holding a preparatory workshop to analyse all the problems associated with seasonal transhumance. This it did, and, in so doing, helped the Mayors and their councillors to identify the key livestock corridors linking the two districts, but more importantly the need for them to get their counterparts in the other district to agree to more reciprocal arrangements for accessing pasturelands in their respective areas. Although the meeting between the two districts did not resolve all the problems, it did arrive at the unanimous decision that they needed to work together to rehabilitate the major livestock corridors linking their two districts.

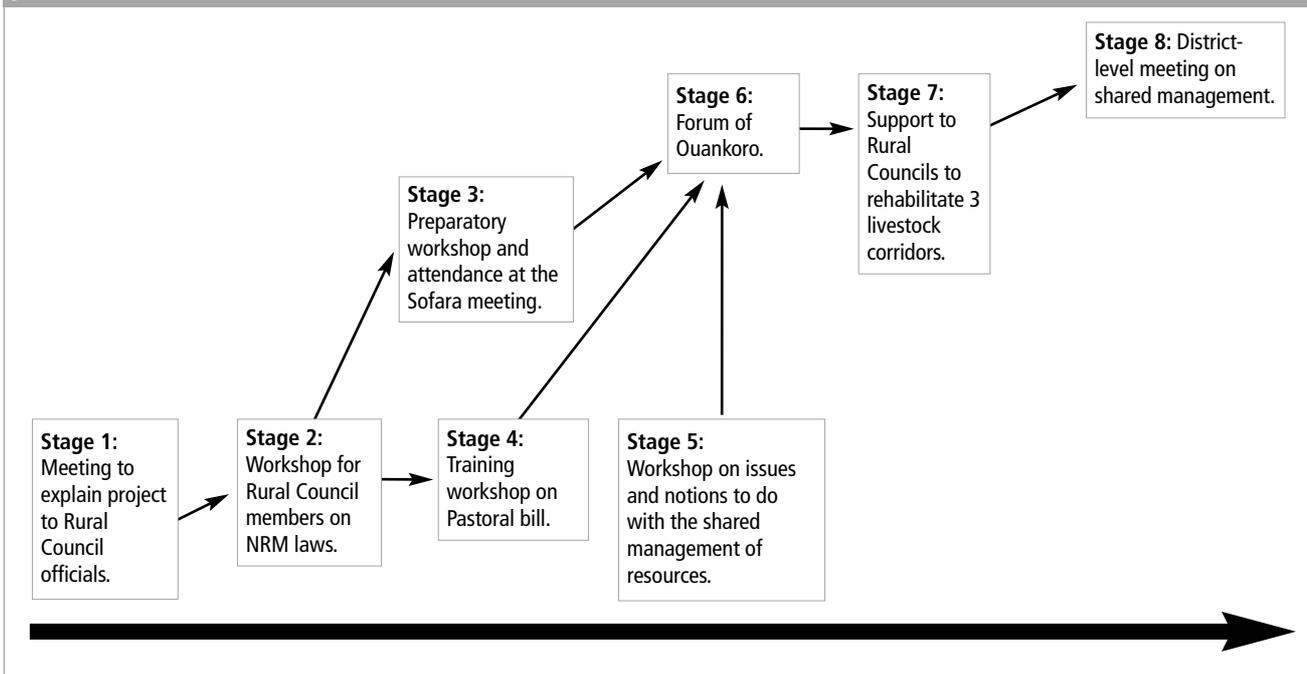
Stage 4

The Rural Councils in the district of Bankass were keen to get on with identifying and demarcating the three major livestock corridors that crossed the areas under their jurisdiction. The danger was that they might do this in a unilateral way without sufficiently involving resident farmers, many of whose fields were blocking these corridors, or resident or transhumant pastoralists who drive their and others' livestock along these corridors. To counter this potential risk, the project organised a workshop to explain to the Mayors and their councillors what provisions the pastoral bill was proposing for the management of livestock corridors. This meeting, in addition to explaining the contents of the bill, was an opportunity to debate the potential effects of such a law on different people's access to resources. The main concerns were that local government authorities in other areas would place high taxes on the use of pastoral land. Other concerns were on the question of formalising access to the residues of the harvest in private fields. The observations from this workshop contributed to the debates on the pastoral law at national level.

Stage 5

SOS Sahel followed up the training workshop on the pastoral bill with another meeting to reinforce the notions of 'social

Figure 1: Building the capacity of the Rural Councils in the District of Bankass to implement participatory planning processes



inclusion' and 'shared management' over such resources as forestlands and pastures, which are used by many different users at different times of the year. Although local government officials do come from the area and are thus aware of the interactions and synergies that exist between farming, livestock rearing and other land use systems, there is still a very strong perception of the need to segregate these activities into distinct spatial units, and to limit their access to local residents. After all, it is the resident population who pay taxes and who vote in the by-elections. Introducing concepts of shared management and asking the local government bodies to use participatory processes to involve local residents is one thing. Asking them to do it for non-residents who are not local taxpayers or voters, and who only periodically visit the area and are perceived as 'outsiders' who cause trouble, is a completely different issue!

Stage 6

A little while later the members of the Rural Councils, with the help of SOS Sahel, organised the Forum of Ouankoro. This was a regional meeting held to discuss the key principles that should guide natural resource management in the district of Bankass. It was a very public affair with delegations from the national offices of the relevant Ministries, representatives from several Embassies and donor organisations, as

well as a very large contingent of participants representing the local populations, development organisations and government bodies. The meeting was a great success in that it managed to identify a number of key principles for the management of resources in the area, including the notions of shared management and subsidiarity.

Stage 7

The Forum of Ouankoro provided an overall framework for a series of activities subsequently carried out by the Rural Councils in a participatory manner with the help of SOS Sahel. One of the first activities consisted of identifying and demarcating the routes followed by three livestock corridors linking the district of Bankass with the Inner Niger Delta. This was an extremely tricky exercise since it required the Mayors and their councillors to convince local residents to remove their fields from these corridors and to give up potential agricultural land for livestock resting places. The Rural Councils did all the consultation work with the local communities with the project only providing logistical support and occasional advice on issues relating to the shared management of resources. In the space of a few months over 100km of livestock corridor was re-identified and marked out.

The management rules for the corridors were designed in a participatory manner during the three consecutive work-

shops. This was how it was done. The Rural Councils and the project had noticed that although the livestock corridors had been re-defined, many farmers continued to plant their crops in them causing conflicts as herders tried to access pastoral areas. The workshops used the newly voted pastoral law as a working tool. This law defines the principles of how pastoral resources in Mali should be managed and gives a lot of space for Rural Councils and local associations to define their own rules. The workshops thus brought these actors together to discuss in small groups the sorts of rules they thought would be most appropriate, and which would be allowed under the law. The results of the group discussions were presented in plenary and a definitive set of rules agreed. These rules were subsequently written down in a document, which was then signed by all twelve Mayors of the District.

To ensure that these rules were respected, monitoring committees were established in each of the Rural Councils directly affected by the livestock corridors, as well as at district level. A key activity undertaken by these committees just before the start of the rainy season in 2002 was to visit all the villages affected by the corridor to remind farmers that they should not be planting crops in the marked corridors.

Stage 8

The final activity to date was the organisation of a district-level meeting to discuss the issues at stake in natural resource management within the context of decentralisation in Mali. In the meeting we used various tools to reiterate the need for the Rural Councils to adopt a long-term vision and to use participatory and inclusive methods of consultation to ensure that everyone, including non-resident groups, are able to contribute to the design of natural resource management plans.

First, we reported back on a study the project had carried out comparing how different users perceive pastoral resources and areas in the Samori forest. Through these discussions the councillors saw how the administration, the settled farmers and the agro-pastoralists all have a very different view of what constitutes 'pastoral areas'. Farmers saw this land as fallow or uncultivated land waiting to be turned into productive farmland, thus ensuring the future of farming in the area. Herders, however, perceive the same land as their dry and/or wet season grazing critical to their livelihood strategies. Getting the workshop participants to understand these divergent perceptions was a very powerful tool in helping to discuss how best to resolve them in a non-conflictual manner.

Second, a summary and depersonalised account of the

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results of the Family Portrait studies were given to the participants in small groups.³ Each group then had to identify and analyse the survival strategies of these families, and the problems they faced in relation to the exclusive management of natural resources.

These two tools, based on real case scenarios in the District of Bankass, allowed the councillors to discuss the issues associated with shared management in an informed manner. As a result of this workshop, the councillors identified the necessary conditions for shared management in the respective areas, and decided to establish consultative bodies at the level of their councils and the district to debate and resolve natural resource management problems on a regular basis.

Lessons learnt from the experience

These consultative bodies are not yet operational but they do offer the opportunity for local government bodies to ensure the regular participation of their citizens in all decisions regarding natural resources in their areas. A lot of work still remains to be done in building the capacity of these bodies to ensure that they are representative and equitable, and are able to debate issues in an informed manner. There are also unresolved issues about how exactly these consultative bodies will work with both customary and modern community-based natural resource management organisations.

However, in the space of two years we have moved from a situation where there was hardly any genuine consultation or informed discussion on the issues at stake, to one in which the Rural Councils are willing to engage with their constituents and share responsibility for the management of natural resources. The key role of the project has been to support a process of action-research on key issues surrounding the shared management of resources, and to provide the opportunities for the Rural Councils and the communities to discuss these issues together in order to arrive at consensual decisions on what best to do for the common good.

Facilitating this process, however, is difficult and requires a number of conditions. First, it takes a long time because it has to go at the speed at which local people and their repre-

³The project had carried out a series of studies on a sample number of families in order better to understand local livelihood strategies.

sentatives can assimilate and accept new ideas. One cannot force the pace without running the risk of driving the process yourself and leaving those whom you want to help far behind. Second, it requires that project workers change their attitudes and ways of working from the classic 'leading and teaching' approach to a process of accompanying local people to understand for themselves the issues at stake, and using their knowledge to find appropriate solutions. Third, an important aspect of this accompanying role is the careful use of research. Research results should be used in a visual

way to contribute to group discussion so that participants can analyse for themselves what are the problems. This then provides a sound basis upon which to discuss how best to find their own solutions.

Our experience is that, in the longer-term, this slow, iterative process consisting of helping all the players first to understand the issues and then to come together to discuss them, is likely to be more sustainable and equitable. Whether it will allow the Rural Councils to fund local development more effectively, however, remains to be seen.

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