



Regional planning, local visions: Participatory futuring in West Africa

Starting in 1990, the Club du Sahel—a branch of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development responsible for coordinating northern donor agencies in support of food security and natural resource management in the desert-edge portions of West Africa—undertook to update existing long-term planning for the region. It cooperated in this effort with the Interstate Committee for Struggle Against Drought in the Sahel (“CILSS” by its francophone acronym), an organization affiliating Ministries of Agriculture and other government agencies of seven Sahelian countries in pursuit of similar goals, headquartered in Ouagadougou.

The work was chiefly carried out by economists and political scientists engaged by the Club du Sahel, who used existing studies and available data on regional trends to project alternate scenarios for the next thirty years of West African development. The resulting document, popularly known as the “West African Long-Term Perspectives Study” or “WALTPS,” stirred a good deal of controversy. There were disagreements between Europeans who favored urban-oriented scenarios and North Americans who were more inclined toward rural-oriented ones, and between Northerners who did most of the analysis and African researchers who felt a little shortchanged. The entire project seemed for a while to be mired in disagreements that obscured the usefulness of the data gathered.

Taking it to the field

The impasse was overcome in part by turning to West African farmers for arbitration. The Club and the CILSS happened to be collaborating at the same time on a participatory study of decentralization and local capacity-building in five countries of the region: Burkina Faso, Ghana, Mali, Niger and Senegal. It involved case studies of local communities and associations which had assumed major new development and management responsibilities on their own. Organizers of the five-country research effort suggested that one way to get beyond the stalemate over the WALTPS Study would be to take its basic questions, observations and conclusions to the field and ask members of these same communities *what they* thought about the matter, since they arguably represented the most important stakeholders of such long-range planning. The specialists expressed some skepticism at such a “populist” approach: did local people have the

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necessary breadth of vision and distance from daily concerns required to contribute to such futuring? Proponents countered that nearly every village had people who had either traveled extensively in the region or were currently away working in coastal cities, if not overseas, and that the combination of this experience with first-hand knowledge of local conditions made them essential counterparts.

In the end, it was decided to undertake a local consultation on long-range planning across the five countries. The African and international researchers involved developed a trial methodology for inviting debate and analysis of the future of the immediate community and the larger region in each of the areas visited. It entailed enlisting representatives from a variety of local social groups in the data collection, discussion and forecasting process.

Protocols for local debate

The work covered five sequential steps:

1. Examine the most important changes that have occurred in the immediate community, the surrounding country and

the West African region as a whole over the last thirty years, concentrating on five related dimensions of daily life:

- environment
- demography
- economy
- society and culture
- politics.

The researchers prepared a digest of the essential findings of the WALTPS Study, but also took care to solicit local viewpoints. The essential question was simply, "How have things changed in your community and its surroundings from these five points of view since the time when today's young adults were themselves babies?"

2. Consider the underlying factors that seem to account for or explain these changes, their relations to each other, and the longer-term trends that they reveal.

3. Imagine the situation that might obtain in another thirty years – in all five areas just named — if the same trends and factors continued to operate in much the same manner.

4. Discuss future scenarios and conditions that the group might prefer to this forecast – that is, the type of future that they would like to deed to their children.

5. Consider what might need to be done at local, national and international levels to move the situation toward these preferred futures.

The methodology used to launch the process and guide debate varied significantly from one country to another:

- In Ghana, for example, the research team took care to enlarge the sample of local associations and businesses visited in order to include a few secondary schools and higher training institutes where they might get the perspective of the next generation of West African leaders. (The methods used in Ghana are presented more fully in a section at the end of this appendix.)
- In Niger and in Mali, the research teams put together African language versions of the facilitator's manual and discussion guide.
- In Burkina Faso, researchers decided to ask each community to name a "panel" of participants, sampled by age and gender, and worked exclusively with this focus group.
- In Senegal, national researchers gave each local research team a set of simple facilitator's aids, including a map of Africa, a map of Senegal and a flip chart with butcher paper and felt-tip markers. The participatory dimension of the exercise

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was also given the greatest prominence in Senegal, where the national research team invited interested local associations to organize the debates themselves, trained the staff that they selected and established contracts with these local institutions for direction of the work.

Local visions

The exercise stirred a great deal of interest in all communities that took part—fifty-six of them in total across the five countries. Substantive results of the experiment can be summarized as follows:

1. The leaders and members of the local associations involved—both women and men—turned out to be very interested in the idea of forecasting and discussing the future of their community, country and region—and quite capable of playing an active role in the exercise. They were particularly gratified by:

- the feeling of having for the first time the opportunity to play a part in political deliberations about development strategy and the future of their environment;
- the chance to get a “systems view” of the evolution of their environment and to question local practices that seemed incompatible with sustainable development;
- this pilot-testing of a procedure that might enable local associations to do more systematic long-term planning and to visualize their relationships with their larger social environment.

2. Their analyses of the changes that have occurred at the local level, of the trends underlying them, and of likely and possible futures coincide often, but not entirely, with those of the authors of the different reference studies. The following themes stood out in the debates:

- The biggest changes and the most disturbing trends identified were those in the ecological and economic domains, concerning agriculture in particular. Widespread and very pronounced awareness of the deterioration of the environment and of the role that human activity (population increase, farming methods, natural resource use) plays in it were everywhere evident.
- Though it is recognized that population is on the increase nearly everywhere and that interaction among social and ethnic groups has intensified at the same time, neither fact is universally interpreted as a problem or a source of conflict.

Opinions regarding family planning differ markedly, particularly between mature and older men, on the one hand, and young people and women on the other. The second group generally supports family planning; the first tends to reject it. One peasant woman in Senegal insists that “we are not machines for manufacturing children.” Yet a *pater familias* in a neighboring community bases his arguments on the far greater population density in areas of Europe: given adequate resources, there should be no problem in handling population growth.

- Local participants give particular emphasis to the relations between urban and rural areas but speak of complementarity, two-way flow, even reverse migration more often than do the authors of the reference studies. Some speakers in towns and cities stress the need for increased investment in rural areas, where most of them continue to have close ties.

- There is general recognition, most pronounced in landlocked countries like Mali and Niger, that it will be necessary henceforth to rely to a greater extent on local resources and ingenuity and that, given growing xenophobia in host countries, out-migration is no longer a good solution.

- Exception is widely taken to the reference studies for not having paid greater attention to the deterioration of social values and to the ethnical and moral side of current trends. The breakup of traditional family structure and an increase in individualism are mentioned in both urban and rural areas.

3. There is a tendency to paint the past (represented for the purposes of this exercise by the 1960s) in somewhat idealized colors: the soil was then fertile, wildlife was abundant, people were content, etc. On the other hand, current circumstances are seen as extremely critical and everyone speaks of seeking remedies.

4. In the political realm, participants gave good marks to the beginnings of democratic processes experienced in recent years but reproached the political parties with creating dissension. Their prescriptions for the future included giving much greater prominence to local governance. Particular importance was attached by nearly all to the phenomena of locally managed associations, cooperative businesses, and intervillage federations. The problem of linking these grassroots movements with the official decentralization and democratization programs now under way was also frequently mentioned.

5. The researchers who coordinated the exercise drew attention to some major resistance to decentralization at the local level among groups that benefit from the present situation and call for clearer policies regarding the procedures to be followed. Better coupling of the top-down forms of decentralization with the bottom-up movements now developing in the field offers perhaps the simplest way of both circumventing local resistance and creating a solid base for decentralization efforts, they felt.

6. Better regional integration and cooperation among the Sahelian countries was mentioned frequently by all participants, but one important qualification to this conclusion stands out. It was recognized that, to a certain degree, the name "Sahel" itself and the membership of the CILSS designate a critical dimension of the problem, not the solution. Economic development in West Africa depends in good measure upon better coordination between landlocked and coastal areas along the north-south axes of precolonial commerce that fueled the development of the regions' great empires but were later broken by colonial patterns. Long-term solutions to economic stagnation seem therefore to require new alignments between Sahelian countries and coastal areas like Nigeria, Benin, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Guinea and Liberia—and across Francophone/Anglophone divides—that CILSS can help facilitate but cannot realize within strictly within its own framework.

Methodological lessons

At the same time, the "local long-range planning study" was a methodological experiment as much as a substantive inquiry into citizens' perceptions of the West African future.

Participants in the concluding workshop felt that the long-term payoff to the methodology tried out in the course of the exercise lies with its transformation into a strategy and a set of tools for *self-assessment and strategic planning of the different types of local associations and businesses* that took part. This kind of instrumentation seems sorely lacking in many associations, which rarely have a method for self-evaluation, information storage and retrieval or planning.

The results show one other thing of major importance as well, and this is the pressing need for better tools and practices of "horizon scanning," strategic planning and information use *within* these organizations. Paradoxically, at a time when project planning methodologies are either falling into disuse or becoming the target of justifiable criticism in aid agencies themselves, some of the most rudimentary and much-used of these tools may turn out to be "just the ticket" in local associations, communities and enterprises.

One of the research teams was asked to propose a simple project planning methodology to a local association involved in the futuring exercise and, somewhat sheepishly, could come up with nothing other on the spot than the ancient "logframe matrix." To the surprise of the researchers, this was an instant hit, because it at least offered a "template" for organizing local reflection about possible futures and worthwhile investments. Perhaps its shortcomings were as much a consequence of being used at the wrong level (very centrally rather than more locally) as they were a function of its inherent invalidity. How much of donor organization and government agency practice now criticized might prove downright catalytic if transposed into the hands of local actors?

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