

# **TOWARDS A PLATFORM FOR DEVELOPMENT: BRINGING TOGETHER PASTORALISTS AND AGRO-PASTORALISTS IN THE KISHI BEIGA AREA (BURKINA FASO (1))**

Bouriema Drabo, Matthias Banzhaf and Dr. Herman Grell

Programme Sahel Burkinabe, Project PSB-GTZ  
Dori, Burkina Faso

## **THE CONTEXT**

### **The Kishi Beiga Area**

Kishi Beiga is a vast region in the Oudalan province of northern Burkina Faso (a country located at the heart of West Africa). Pastoralism is the main activity in the area; rainfall is quite low (isohyets of 350 to 600 mm) and very irregular in time and space.

The area consists of numerous villages and hamlets and many different ethnic groups, including the Touaregs, the Bellah, various Peul subgroups and other groups derived from the Songhai (Mallébé). Kishi Beiga falls under the traditional authority of a Touareg chief (who has just been reinstated), the canton chief who lives in Gorom Gorom and controls the entire Oudalan district. The government is represented by a Mallébé village administrator.

The area holds tremendous potential for pastoralism and, as a result, several transhumance groups from neighboring regions appear periodically and attempt to cohabit with the sedentary agro-pastoralists. There are vast dry season and rainy season pasturelands, ponds, water courses and salt resources used for treatments.

### **The Development Dilemma**

Like the rest of the Sahelian region within the country, the area is undergoing major change. This change affects social systems, land tenure and production systems. Accelerated degradation of the natural resources essential for productive activity is now occurring in the area. The degradation is linked to a general worsening of climatic conditions, heightened by successive droughts and human actions. Furthermore, traditional systems of land management are in a constant state of destabilization. In earlier days, this 'pastoral El Dorado' was informally managed by a committee of elders appointed by the canton chief. Today, however, this form of management has disappeared and, as a result of drought conditions, the area has lost its strategic value, leading to greater competition for natural resources. Thus, the population is caught in a cycle of relentless impoverishment and, among other repercussions, local youth are migrating toward the coastal countries and gold-bearing sites.

### **Context of the Operation**

There are three key factors:

- The shadow of the revolutionary period that the country has undergone, producing profound changes in rural communities, such as a new consciousness, a land reform conferring ownership of lands on the state, and a weakening of the authority of traditional chiefs;

- The emergence of a new approach to rural development, namely village land management; and,
- The processes of democratization and decentralization.

### **The Burkina Sahel Program and Its Operational Strategy**

The Burkina Sahel Program is an anti-desertification program to develop the Burkina Sahel region. It was conceived in 1986 based on analytic conclusions drawn from earlier operations and the CILSS regional strategy. It is financed by several donors, including the German Federal Republic through GTZ.

The project component called Village Lands and Natural Resources Management through Self-Development in the Burkina Sahel (PSB/GTZ) is based on a village lands management approach that is both flexible and participatory, and that takes account of realities in the field and the various policies and strategies in effect, such as:

- Decentralization in rural areas; and,
- The international anti-desertification agreement.

In its development, the project fits the pattern of a learning process and applies the principles of partnership and accountability with respect to the beneficiary populations.

The project has operated in the Kishi Beiga area since 1991. Initially designed for a limited pilot area as a way to test the applicability of the village lands management approach in the context of the Sahel, the project's operations now cover a larger area.

Since 1995, the authors of the present article have been heavily involved in triggering the learning process concerning the area's organizational mechanisms.

### **INITIAL ACTIONS**

The first steps taken by the project were to systematically set up a village lands management organization and develop miscellaneous infrastructure. Evaluation of these actions served to highlight the following shortcomings: the organization's lack of representativeness and the failure to take certain groups into account, including transhumance pastoralists. Thus, somewhat dysfunctional community management was observed on numerous levels: economic units (cereal banks), community infrastructure (pumps, boulis), and relative anarchy in resource utilization (ponds, salt resources, fields, etc.).

This phenomenon can be attributed to several factors:

#### **A Problem of Leadership**

During the Burkina revolution of August 1983, traditional chiefs lost their political power. The Bellah, who were captives of the Touaregs, gained their freedom. The absence of a village chief led to a leadership conflict as each of the two main ethnic groups (the Mallébé and the Touaregs) sought to control the management of political power. Through their leaders, both communities attempted to position themselves favorably. On-going, latent conflicts were thus likely to erupt at any moment in connection with externally funded rural development initiatives. There were efforts to monopolize such support and efforts to sabotage development actions as well.

#### **Land Legislation**

After the land reform was announced in 1984, a system of state ownership of rural lands was instituted. At the grass roots level, the reform was poorly understood. There was no longer any person or group responsible for managing pastoral resources. This socio-political chaos, heightened by the cumulative effects of droughts, effectively eliminated all forms of rational management of the area's resources.

### **Project Approach**

The approach was relatively closed and rigid and was designed for land with finite limits, i.e. agricultural lands. It did not take into account the full dimensions of pastoralism and the complexity of the socio-ethnic and political circumstances of Kishi Beiga.

## **THE PROCESS OF CHANGE**

Given the failure of the initial intervention, after a pause the project revised its approach and its operating principles. The new strategy consisted of encouraging an interactive process of communication with all groups and neighborhoods as a way to begin the learning process and develop the local potential for consultation among different groups. The goal was to achieve a level of organization that makes it possible to plan and re-plan actions and encourage collaborative and sustainable management of the land and its resources (both agricultural and pastoral). The role of the project was limited to facilitating discussions about cooperative action, based on the use of participatory tools and an open approach to village lands management.

Once this partnership arrangement was established, the population of Kishi Beiga, eager to secure a radiant future for the area, succeeded in placing collective interests above individual interests, specifically through the creation of a consultative unit linking different groups, for which the process of official recognition has just been settled. The unit is made up of 18 persons, including both agro-pastoralists (Touaregs, Mallébé Bellah, Peul Sillubé and Rimaibé) and pastoralists (Peul Gaobé, Djelgobé and Dogabé). The members of the unit are democratically selected by the population of Kishi Beiga insofar as each quarter is represented by at least two elders.

The unit is composed of:

- A president from the Touareg ethnic group who has legal authority over the population;
- A vice-president who replaces the president whenever he is absent;
- A secretary who records conflicts that are resolved;
- A spokesperson who informs the village about all decisions related to conflict resolution; and,
- Other members.

It should be noted that the village administrator is not a member of this committee, but is limited instead to administrative tasks. For example, the village administrator is responsible for referring conflicts to the prefect when they cannot be settled locally.

The key actors in this process of change are the Touareg leader, the current head of the consultative unit, and the project facilitator, a local person who is fully connected to the area's socio-cultural fabric.

Tremendous progress has recently been achieved in developing the structure and operations of the unit:

- Geographic poles of consultation have been set up which, as a result of their proximity to local communities, translate into more effective action and reduce the cumbersomeness associated with such vast spaces; and,

- Channels of communication have been improved by arranging a series of information releases and keeping records at each level (unit, pole, village, neighborhood).

The head of the unit has succeeded in bringing the different ethnic groups closer together through moral persuasion, while the project facilitator has used his outreach skills and his perfect knowledge of the area to push the process forward.

Actual implementation of the consultative unit concept devised by technical and financial partners active in the area serves to coordinate and harmonize individual actions and also represents a decisive turning point in supporting initiatives by the population.

## **THE RESULTS**

As of 1996, i.e. one year after the project was resumed, the unit had already succeeded in setting up rules governing the utilization of resources such as post-harvest pasturage, boulis, salt resources and ponds, as well as the zoning of village lands.

In addition, the unit had managed to settle conflicts between Peul transhumants and Mallébé and Bellah agro-pastoralists concerning the management of infrastructure such as pumps.

More recent accomplishments (1997) concern:

- Setting up new rules to protect trees and natural water points;
- Virtually total self-reliance on the part of the unit as regards its operations: many more meetings are held and decisions made without the knowledge of the project and other stakeholders;
- Self-planning (i.e. grassroots planning) of development actions in the region at the prompting of the consultative unit, facilitated by planners (men and women farmers) that the project has trained and by the strengthened organizational arrangements resulting from the creation of geographic poles; and,
- Initiating forums for negotiations with technical and financial partners in order to mobilize resources for implementation of their micro-projects on the restoration of natural resources and socio-economic development.

The advantages of the approach followed by the project are multifaceted:

- A platform of expression and counter-argument that is conducive to resolving latent conflicts between different groups: the general interest overrides individual concerns; and,
- The interactive approach for self-evaluation of the unit allows the project to move forward and achieve a level of vitality that goes beyond meetings organized in the past.

In the future, this institution expects to play an active role in entities set up to implement decentralization. Immediate actions are expected to include:

- Establishing a natural resources management plan, in collaboration with the local government, to complement the efforts already made in the area of rational natural resources management;
- Setting up a local system to monitor the impact of environmental actions; and,
- Establishing a local, self-managed investment fund.

## **THE PRINCIPAL LESSONS**

The concept of a consultative unit is based on the area's former organizational structure, which served to regulate access to resources on a seasonal basis. Indeed, the acceptance and effectiveness of the unit rely on this earlier model.

The project's role as a catalyst, largely operating through the project facilitator, has given producers broad latitude to initiate the same process themselves. This approach enhances the sustainability of the institution, which now has greater opportunity to continue its operations after the project ends.

Recognition of resource persons and decision-making bodies is a key factor in the success of the process.

Selecting relevant, participatory tools for iterative and interactive tasks is more appropriate than a tidy, rigid approach.

This process, considered highly effective by all parties concerned, is a 'first' for the region. In many respects, it has provided inspiration to teams operating in the project's other target areas and certain development partners.

From the perspective of producers in the Kishi Beiga area, social harmony and the area's progress are significantly indebted to the effectiveness of the consultative unit, which views itself as a platform for development.

### **Endnote**

(1) This document is an abbreviated translation of the original text in French.