

## Chapter 10

# Land, environmental management and the new governance in Burkina Faso

*Simon Batterbury*<sup>1</sup>



Figure 10.1 Burkina Faso: case study location.

## Introduction

The societies of dryland West Africa have witnessed considerable turmoil over the ownership of, access to, and the rights to exploit land and other natural resources. This chapter looks at the particular challenges faced by one dryland country, Burkina Faso, where considerable efforts have been made to improve the governance of rural land and natural resources in recent years. Burkina Faso provides an interesting example of how natural resource management and the reorganization of political governance can become linked. By means of three case studies, I argue that Burkinabés have remained agile and ‘adaptive’ – seeking out their own solutions to land pressures and livelihood security, even as several governance experiments and political decentralization have slowly been put in place.

After introducing Burkina Faso and its history I focus on two recent episodes; the efforts by international development agencies to enable resilient rural societies following the devastating droughts of the 1980s that affected the Sahel, and more recent efforts to enact ‘governance reforms’, which have involved the decentralization of political powers. These two campaigns are linked, but, crucially, there has been a progressive move away from a populist faith in human ingenuity, best expressed in Burkina’s experimentation with socialism in the mid-1980s, to hierarchical forms of governance that prioritize service delivery, services, and the strengthening of links between local rural communities and the state.

In the first case, I show that international development organizations view economic viability and enhanced welfare as strongly linked to the creation of resilient local environments with secure access to natural resources. In the second example, decentralization involves shifting political control, and political responsibilities, down to newly elected bodies in accordance with international norms of ‘good governance’ (Batterbury and Fernando 2006). These two trends – international development efforts around resource management and political decentralization – share a concern with ‘equity’ and land security, but in practice, powerful actors hold sway over weaker ones. As a result, land access issues are constantly being renegotiated, rather than ‘solved’, and efforts to create strong and well funded local government, capable of managing land disputes and land titles, is still a distant possibility because of established interests and a lack of funding (Lund 2008).

## Burkina Faso

Haute Volta (Upper Volta, now Burkina Faso) was colonized by France in 1896 after a military campaign against its indigenous population, particularly the dominant Mossi. This was a period when Britain and France were competing for dominance in the region. France came to dominate the drylands – the

Sahel – fairly quickly, from Senegal in the west to Chad in the east. Its colonial presence has a bearing on contemporary governance debates, since ideas about territorial control and administration have some of their origins in this period. Haute Volta was something of a failure as a colony, compared to its neighbors like the coastal plantation economies of Côte d'Ivoire (French) and the Gold Coast (British). Situated in the dry, hot, remote, and relatively unproductive interior of West Africa, it lacked lucrative trading possibilities aside from sales of livestock products and cotton (its modest gold reserves were then undiscovered). Between 1904 and 1919 and again from 1932–1947 Haute Volta was absorbed into a larger French administered territory.

The period prior to 1910 placed 'severe strain' on the Mossi, the dominant ethnic group of Burkina Faso (Skinner 1989: 14). Administrative structures right across the territory were altered to consist of *cercles* and these, with a French administrator (*Commandant*), oversaw the district chiefs and provincial leaders (*chefs de canton*). Village chiefs remained in place, and were created where they had not previously existed – their roles changed under successive administrations. Initially, some could raise taxes themselves and recruit colonial labor (Hagberg 2007: 134). It was only from the 1920s, under Governor Hesling, that French political control softened (Skinner 1989: 161), but Burkinabés were forced to adhere to the brutal Indigénat legal code, that permitted imprisonment without trial, until 1948. In addition, Catholic missions and schools promoted Christian marriage, education, and some western health care, which destabilized existing animist and Islamic culture. Migrant laborers constructed colonial buildings and roads. Conscription for the French Army began in 1912, and continued until Independence.

French military and administrative cadres were well aware of the paucity of the region's natural resources, and began a long process that culminated in the Sahelian region becoming a supplier of forced labor for the more prosperous coastal colonies, and for the Army. Subsequent voluntary economic migration has kept the migrant stream strong. Thus, '[i]t was the fate of one of the most well structured kingdoms of the West African Sahel to become the "labor reservoir" for French West Africa' (Gervais 1987: 109, referring to the Mossi). Some *naabas* (chiefs) were willing to allow the cultivation of large, communal cotton fields on their lands, with contract labour.

But by introducing household taxation increasingly payable only in French francs, linked to the Indigénat, the colonial state forced local workers into the regional cash economy. Burkinabé laborers worked on plantations and in factories thousands of kilometers away, particularly in present-day Côte d'Ivoire, where groundnut oil, coffee, and cocoa were the main products, and where up to half a million migrant workers from Burkina made their lives. Voluntary labor migration to Côte d'Ivoire

increased further after World War II. Today it is strong and at any one time, a significant percentage of a Burkinabé village's net income may be sourced from migrant remittances.<sup>2</sup>

Haute Volta finally gained independence from France in 1960. The country experienced six leadership changes between 1960 and 1987 (Englebert 1996). Sahelian droughts, leading to widespread food shortages, occurred in the mid-1970s and again in the mid-1980s, and began a significant international flow of aid to the country (Batterbury and Warren 2001). The rise to power and short tenure as national leader (1983–7) of an army officer, Thomas Sankara, energized the newly renamed nation. Sankara was a populist leader, committed to progressive social change and opposed to the strongly hierarchical social systems that supported the power of traditional chiefs, which he branded as 'feudal' (Hagberg 2007: 134; Martin 1986). Locally elected *Comites de la Défense de la Révolution* (CDRs) were formed in rural villages, generally from the younger generation, and were vested with administrative powers (Spiers 1991). Although the country is now a neoliberal regime under a long-running incumbent, Blaise Compaoré, the spirit of Sankara's legacy is still visible in some rural areas.

The Mossi represent at least 60 percent of the population today. They have a strongly hierarchical and centralized system of governance – traditionally organized as kingdoms and smaller client states although disempowered by French colonization (Skinner 1989; Tauxier 1912). They are the descendants of warrior immigrants from the northern Ghana region that gradually subdued and assimilated the pre-existing indigenous population (the nyononse). The distinction between the nakombse (Mossi) and nyononse structures many aspects of social life and land allocation (Ouedraogo 2006).

Mossi culture illustrates what Fiske calls Communal Sharing:

Communal Sharing desires to share, belong, and be one with others. The scarcest material resources on which Mossi (*Moose*) survival depends are labor, water and land. Moose pool these resources and share them freely within communal groups at various levels extending from the inner lineage out to total strangers.

(Fiske 1990: 235)

While sharing occurs today, village life privileges the closer lineages. Overlapping land rights and uses can pose particular problems. The rights of pastoral people, the Peul, to move their herds across the largely fixed agrarian landscape of the Mossi can give rise to conflict. Not only do herds pose a risk to growing crops in certain seasons, but the Mossi themselves have animals and lay claim to grazing resources. Traditional dispute mechanisms include compensation made to farmers for crops damaged by livestock,

but more serious sanctions are not uncommon and the Sahel has seen many examples, particularly during drought, of violent farmer–herder conflicts. (Breusers 1998; Hussein et al. 1999; Ouedraogo 1997; Thebaud and Batterbury 2001)

Land tenure and the quality of the local rural environment are difficult issues to prise apart in Burkina Faso. Environmental planning in the West African Sahel has its roots in the colonial period. France instituted a range of large, technocratic projects to halt soil erosion on mid-slope sandy soils ‘in its tracks’ (Batterbury 1997). The prime concern of the early administrators and bureaucrats was the effect of ‘chaotic’ land use practices on soil erosion and land productivity, at a time when the regime was trying to maintain financial self-sufficiency and to increase its export of cotton. The fact that labor migration was also responsible for disrupted traditional agrarian systems, withdrawing essential labor from erodible soils for long periods, was not mentioned.

One of these major conservation initiatives, the GERES project, took place in Burkina Faso just after independence in the 1960s. It involved bulldozing large earthen structures across the hillsides cultivated by subsistence Mossi farmers, in an effort to pond up the water from the intense (unimodal) summer rains. Farmers resented the bulldozers, the patronizing attitude of the contractors, and the large size of these conservation structures, which created malarial mini-lakes and hardly helped increase soil moisture for their millet fields. The structures did not respect field boundaries, or landownership. Farmers refused to maintain them and they fell into disrepair.

Environmental policy did evolve. Following the severe Sahelian droughts of the 1970s and early 1980s, aid money flowed. International aid organizations worked in several sectors including natural resource management and land rehabilitation. Most projects tried to increase the resilience of local peoples to future episodes of drought and climatic change. Large areas of blackfly-infested water courses in the south of the country were cleared for irrigated crop production and new settlement. Thousands, particularly Mossi, moved southwards to these schemes (McMillan 1995). In the drier north, there were small local NGOs, which obtained money from European sources for small projects like agroforestry plantations and compost pits, and more ambitious and spatially expansive schemes funded by bilateral and multilateral aid from Western donors.

Some of the more well known examples include Oxfam’s *Projet Agroforestier (PAF)*, which began to experiment with local and appropriate forms of soil conservation like *diguettes* (permeable stone contour lines), and *PATECORE*, a large German funded project working in partnership with the government from the late 1980s, involving about 250 villages on the Central Plateau (Batterbury 1998). This period was a significant turning point in the region’s environmental history, since from small beginnings,

large-scale land rehabilitation resulted. One science writer dubbed Burkina's *diguette* construction a 'revolution' in self-help and over the next ten years, projects went some way to living up to this grand claim (Harrison 1987).

*Diguettes* and *digues filtrantes* (semi-permeable rock dams) slowed the erosion of topsoil on fields, and in the gullies and rills caused by de-vegetation on sandy soils. PAF used a simple water tube level device to find the contour line, and trained farmers to build *diguettes* at intervals across the contour. Rainfall infiltration was improved and excess water flowed through, and over, the stones. PATECORE believed that 'erosion runs faster than a donkey cart' – in other words, that local skills to manage erosion and to retain decent subsistence and commercial crop yields could – sensitively and by means of 'backstopping rather than controlling' – be augmented by technical and logistical support. In the 1980s they developed an approach called *gestion des terroirs villageois* (GTV) – village land-use management. Focused on conservation and land rehabilitation, it began with a request from villagers for assistance, followed by participatory land-use planning during which air photos were used to identify watercourses, erosion, and field boundaries. This was a novelty, and the technique was widely praised and replicated. It culminated in local conservation activity – largely consisting of assistance, through the local agricultural extension agents, to build *diguettes* and *digues filtrantes* on village land (Figure 10.2). Since communities and their leaders led much of the process, with regular support from the project, results were positive: good local community group cohesion and raised crop yields (Batterbury 1997, 1998). 'Polycentric' governance was a feature of these initiatives; because of the hierarchical leadership structure of the Mossi, the village chief and customary elders were central in the whole process, ensuring fair play, but also empowering village committees (some with their origins in the socialist Sankara period) to take the lead on organizing the work and taking other conservation measures such as tree planting and digging compost pits.

PATECORE ran until 2004. Issuing from a busy project office, geographers trained at the University of Ouagadougou went into rural communities and helped them to interpret maps and air photos, and to design and plan for conservation work. Soil scientists and extension agents assisted in the actual construction of *diguettes*. German Deutschmarks (lots of them) paid for Brazilian-made Mercedes trucks, to haul stones from the base of hillsides to the conservation sites where villagers unloaded them and used them to construct the *diguettes* according to their land-use plans. Thousands of hectares of fields have been conserved in this way, and the project is generally thought to be one of the most successful of its type (Batterbury 1998). For example Dutch geographer Chris Reij argued that the actions of PATECORE on the Central Plateau, along with other projects, appeared to be 'greening' this portion of the Sahel, viewed from air photos, remote sensing, and local surveys (Pearce 2002). Thus, Malthusian thinking was



Figure 10.2 Diguettes under construction by Mossi farmers in Ibi, 1993.  
Source: S Batterbury.

significantly challenged. The technological innovation, the *diguette*, accords with local knowledge and is relatively easy to build and maintain. Yet it is set within nests of power and governance institutions that mean it is not a neutral ‘object’.

Indeed, recent developments in the theory and practice of community conservation worldwide, which direct attention to power dynamics among rural actors, indicate that not all aspects of PATECORE’s efforts were successful. It was probably a ‘second-best’ form of community planning, in that some villages required significant input by the project head office to initiate conservation. There were some internal village disputes about land and other matters, and great gender inequality (to the detriment of women) in the *diguette* construction work. There were sometimes clashes between the efficient German management teams and the locally knowledgeable Burkinabé counterparts (Batterbury 1997, 2005; Moore 2001). But PATECORE did combine deliberative and performative participation (Richards 2007). This was through the combination of argumentation and deliberation in village meetings and consultations, and active participation in group labor (Fig 10.2).

### ‘Managing’ the land: three examples

To illustrate some of these overlapping issues, I draw on my own field research. Rollo *département* is a subdivision of Bam Province, situated approximately 160 km by road north of Burkina Faso’s capital city, Ouagadougou (see location map on title page). The *département* suffers from inadequate water resources due to its sandy soils and topography. Older residents attest that the area has always been sparsely populated. The village

of Rollo is the administrative center. It has a primary school, small market and a dispensary. It was an established Mossi village by the end of the nineteenth century, although its origins as part of the Mossi kingdom of Rissiam are much older.

Political authority in the region was, for much of the post-colonial period, split between the *préfet*, the sole government official at Rollo responsible for the twenty-four villages of the administrative district, and a network of customary village chiefs. Most services are handled from Kongoussi, 45 km south.

First, Ibi Palaga is a community of 300 Mossi (in 27 households, 1993) established more than 160 years ago. It is south of Rollo. The chief of Ibi Palaga also held jurisdiction over the nearby community of Ibi Koudougou, and a large, well defined territory of bush and farmed land. Ibi is dominated by traditional Mossi farming practices. Cultivation is almost always by *daba* hoe/digging stick, and in 1993 there was a single donkey plough, three donkey carts and a handful of bicycles in the whole village. In that year, almost all households planted local cereal varieties with small quantities of fertilizer being used by two farmers. Agricultural sales were restricted to groundnuts, sesame, tobacco and other 'garden' crops, traded in limited quantities in local markets. The village was 80 percent self-sufficient in grains in 1993. Crop sales average around AU\$4.2 per year per household; real cash income was more likely to come from animal sales and weaving work. Around 20–30 teenagers and young adults were working as economic migrants in the urban centers of Ouagadougou, Bobo-Dioulassou or Abidjan; few of these were regular returnees to the village. Remittances from these migrants were small, mainly subsidizing grain purchases in bad years (Batterbury 1997).

The village formed associations in the early 1990s. All the committee members (ten in all) were Ibi Palaga farmers. Communal farming was carried out on a designated plot, with the aid of the women's group. I watched the group undertake restoration of degraded land surrounding the central compounds in 1992, supported by PATECORE. Previous to this date, little contact existed with development organizations outside occasional visits from an extension agent. Several hundred meters of *diguettes* were built (Figure 10.2), and the land brought back into productive use. In the mid-1990s two wells were built, although they soon dried up.

While the construction of *diguettes* across individual fields was a successful communal activity, Ibi is situated on the fringes of a large area of almost uninhabited communal forest, to the north. The shortage of fuel wood in Ouagadougou brings woodcutters to the area and under Burkina's land laws (the RAF) customary authorities from neighboring villages like Ibi have few legal grounds to challenge this, since land belongs officially to the state. A former NGO worker targeted this forest for several years in order to make a profit from fuel wood sales. As at 2001, surveys were being carried out to see if the area could support more fuel wood extraction.

Accords would then be set up between the 17 villages around the area to manage this land and its timber resource, with sharing of benefits. Already, dissent was emerging around the issue.

Second, Toessin is 12 km from Ibi, and is a little closer to a road. The village dates from 1918, and was founded by Yarsé migrants (traders of Mande origin, who intermarry with the Mossi) whose proximate origin was a more southerly village and from nearby Rollo. Toessin's population was around 350, in 38 households. The Yarsé are Muslim, and do not practise Mossi harvest festivals and fertility rites. Lineage heads generally take village decisions – there is no chief. Unlike Ibi, the village has a small seasonal water course (*bas-fond*), which allows some extension of the cropping season onto richer clay soils, termed *bole*. Erosion is if anything more severe than at Ibi. Sheet wash and rill erosion gives rise to extensive tracts of *zipellé* (dead land) where the topsoil has been removed entirely, leaving surface crusts interspersed with clusters of hardy shrubs and grasses.

Partly by virtue of its merchant roots, the village shows more obvious signs of participation in the regional economy. Many male residents leave to seek paid work in the dry season (November–April) and several are *commerçants* with stalls in the regional markets. A small number of men live in the village only for the cropping season, and work elsewhere. Farming techniques include the use of small quantities of fertilizer by 30 percent of farmers (in 1993) and nine donkey ploughs, used widely on sandy soils. The village was only 20 percent self-sufficient in food in 1992 (Batterbury 1997). Mopeds, bicycles, ploughs and other assets are present in small numbers.

The PATECORE environmental project worked in Toessin from 1989 until the 2000s, assisting with the construction of several hundred meters of well built *diguette* systems. The rural extension services were active, visiting the village up to once a week in the cropping season. Most importantly, Toessin received a primary school in 1995, with three teachers. Dissent with neighboring communities – over land, governance, and marriage relations – has meant that only Toessin children attend this school.

The village illustrates a difficulty with the *gestion des terroirs* approach to land management. Despite having a nucleated settlement pattern, the '*terroir*' is hard to define, and not all decisions over land tenure and access are made within the community. Toessin residents farm a zone over which they have very little customary rights, and they have poor control over land tenure. This unusual situation has come about since the village was carved out of the pre-existing territory of Rollo to the west and from land settled by Peul herders in the eighteenth century to the south.

There is a threefold division of Toessin-used space, as follows:

- Some 46 percent of the area cultivated by Toessin farmers is controlled from the larger settlement of Rollo. Numerous Rollo residents cultivate close to and among Toessin farmers, while Toessin residents are forced

to ask permission of the Rollo authorities to clear and farm a new plot of land, or must 'rent' from Rollo landholders. The planting of trees or construction of conservation works on this borrowed land is often prohibited.

- Peul still control all land to the south of the *bas-fond* and have two permanent encampments in this region. Mossi/Yarse require their permission to farm here. Relations with farmer 'tenants' on Peul land are generally good. For these farmers to construct *diguettes* or plant trees would be seen as laying claim to land not theirs to manage, however, and is quite strongly proscribed.
- Closer around the village itself, land has for some years been controlled *de facto* by village elders at Toessin – a small area 'carved out' from the Rollo *terroir*. It is here that many impressive *diguettes* were constructed over a three-year period in the 1990s on 17 percent of the cultivated area, on land once heavily degraded and stripped of topsoil by fierce summer runoff (Batterbury 1997).

This three-fold division of rights to land is further complicated by the existence of a '*responsable administrative*' (administrative chief) at the settlement of Kiella, who was, until recent government reforms, charged with tax collection and dealings with the government for a zone that includes several villages. Toessin lacks political authority and is viewed by the state as part of a larger entity. The residents of Toessin, fiercely protective of their identity, lack the political power to dispute this situation. In 2001 they were looking to the newly announced government decentralization process to seek redress.

The village group, which is a registered *association*, called Tendg Songho, comprises virtually all-adult males and a cross section of women, and coordinates all conservation activities. Activities the group has undertaken included *diguette* construction and management of shared water sources. As an example some 235 individuals (considerably more than the formal membership of the group) built a huge communal compost pit and around 100 individuals were regularly involved in building *diguettes* on the bush fields in the mid-1990s. But competition *among* villages is very evident at a higher political level. Fiske's Communal Sharing motivations are not universally active; they are dependent on scale, locality, and the nature of the groups in question (Fiske 1990).

Prior to 1990, Toessin farmers operated a joint village association with the residents of nearby Kiella. A long dispute, common in this region, fissured the two communities in the late 1980s. Kiella, Toessin residents said, deprived them of resources and under-reported their tax returns. Kiella has opportunistically used their forward position on the only road into the area. In 1987, Toessin was approved to receive a well from the Saudi-Arabian funded water borehole program. Kiella was not. When technicians arrived

on the road with their equipment, they were told to begin digging at Kiella, whose residents cunningly failed to mention that Toessin was to be found further down the road. The drilling of a borehole in the wrong village was narrowly avoided. When water was later discovered and successfully tapped at Toessin, relations became strained and inter-marriage between the two communities was withdrawn when I was working there. Services have to be duplicated in the two villages. In addition, Rollo farmers are now very prominent in asserting their Mossi land rights in the Toessin territory, to the extent that summer encampments belonging to Rollo farmers have now been moved closer to the village center.

All of these issues indicate the true complexities of what, on paper, may be perceived as polycentric governance around a village center, but actually involves complex 'social' tenures and disagreements. These issues do not disappear under political decentralization – indeed they become more strained. In addition, development projects are hardly innocent bystanders to village politics. The presence of PATECORE in the village acted as a form of symbolic capital. It signaled to other development agencies that this was a hardworking and development-compliant community, capable of working with other outside actors (Batterbury 2005; Bierschenk et al 2000). The community was, eventually, to achieve more than land rehabilitation for its efforts to impress outsiders – it received a school and wells.

A third example illustrates a further complexity of social relations where large numbers of pastoralists, exploiting common grazing land, are present. Bouloye-tiouli village is in Seno, 35 km west of the town of Dori, and it was founded around 1900. This region is more arid than the villages described above, and thus has a greater focus on livestock herding (Figure 10.3). The village straddles fixed dunes and a small river channel and is surrounded by some farming and common grazing land. The original occupants were Peul (Fulbé), soon joined by Rimaibé and Bella. It gained its first traditional chief only in 1954; the institution survived the Sankara period and the chief was renamed as *délégué administratif* of the village.

Conflicts between farmers and herders over rangelands and water points are common, and Fulani social systems are frequently misunderstood by development projects. However, as Banzhaf et al. (2000) show, there have been interesting efforts to 'negotiate' solutions to longstanding ethnic and resource conflicts. Bouloye-tiouli has a local management council, but it is suffering greatly from latent conflicts between farmers and herders.

Livelihood activities comprise agriculture, pastoralism, weaving, and pottery. Many of the younger males migrate in the dry season, to Mali and Niger for Koranic school, and to Côte d'Ivoire and local gold mines for work. The chief deals with both land issues and political decision making. Traditional 'Walde' (age-based) organizations sit alongside three organizations representing farmers, men, and women. Since 1988 there has been a *Cadre de Concertation* (coordination committee, CdC) of 22 members

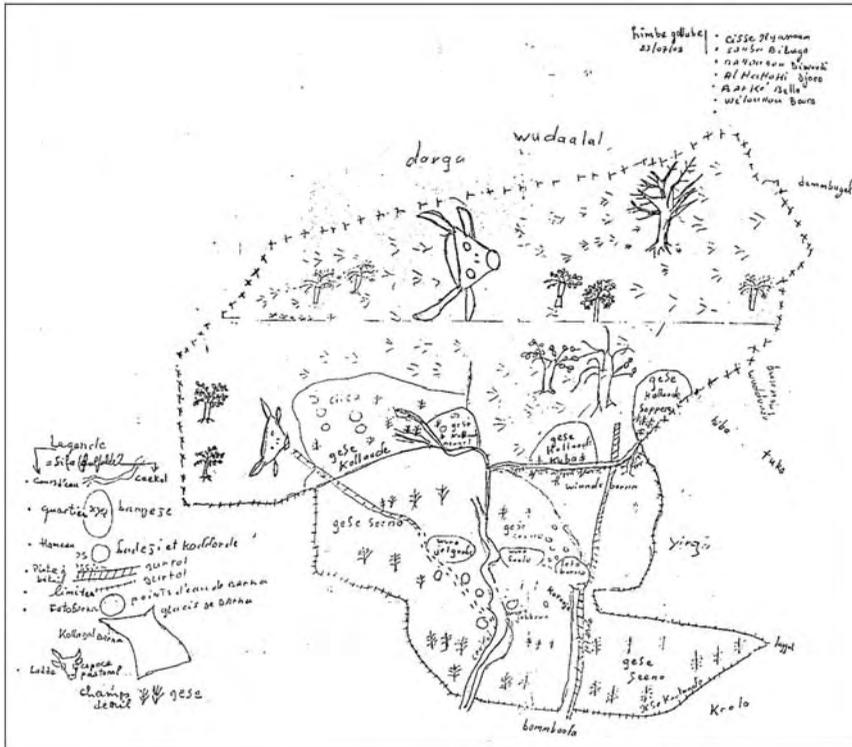


Figure 10.3 Territory map, Bouloye-tiouli drawn by villagers, 2001.  
Source: Facilitated by A Soua (2001).

and the traditional chief, to help manage natural resources. This initiative was supported financially and technically by the Projet Sahel Burkinabé, another German initiative similar to PATECORE in its aims and methods. The CdC can be convened to discuss land management issues and problems.

Obtaining land in the village is traditionally achieved by asking the chief. Very occasionally, plots are sold. The encroachment of farming onto pastoral land has led to several conflicts, notably over livestock routes that have become blocked by farmers. The chief is the prime arbitrator of land-use conflicts, sometimes in collaboration with the Imam. Negotiated outcomes include fines issued for trespass or crop damage. In 1994/5 for example an area of communal forest was seriously under pressure from farmers and woodcutters, and a decision was made to allow it to regenerate by use-sanctions, announced at Friday prayers to give the decision more weight. More severe conflicts are sometimes sent up to Provincial leaders and state agencies, but this is rare. A conflict in 2001 concerned pastoral space.

The chief had become a disengaged and often absent member of the *Cadre de Concertation*. It emerged that the chief was actually authorizing the sale of land in the communal grazing areas, and thereby generating a small income. In the face of this the *Cadre de Concertation* did not act decisively. The chief attempted to destabilize the institution so that he could continue to make short-term profit while in the long term reassert his political power, including over land-use decisions. The members responded by rounding against him, using arguments about environmental protection as well as the need for accountability and democracy. The development project, the PSB, was surprised by the speed at which these reactions accelerated (Soura 2001).

This example shows how conflicts can escalate, especially when local land-use pressures rise (in this case from new arrivals and new grazing pressures). At the same time, a range of mechanisms come into play, including consensual decision making, in opposition to the modern concept of land sales. The problem of control over grazing lands was really a question of power and the assertion of rights and control. In Bouloye-Tiouli new actors, including the PSB, find themselves relatively powerless to act, lacking the local legitimacy of the chief and his supporters. The dangers for a 'modern' decentralization of political power are clear. If powers are devolved to the traditional institution, the chieftaincy, there would be a lack of accountability and trust. If devolved to non-traditional institutions, like the CdC set up by PSB, this is seen to usurp traditional authority structures. This is the central tension faced in a country in which chiefly powers are still respected, but in the new context of party political institutions (Hagberg 2007: 147). Nonetheless, pressures on natural resources continue to grow, and some hybrid form of regulatory authority is probably essential in this and other cases.

### Modern-day decentralization

The debate over governance and over the scale, and form, of the management of land and natural resources in these three studies has been partially removed from local actors by recent government decisions. Thus ironically, the *Sankariste* belief in rural populism and the struggle of the masses, and the centuries-old chieftaincies, are each being overturned by a political process ironically termed 'decentralization'. Following a well-worn path, already familiar to Burkina's neighbors in Mali and Senegal, there have now been almost 20 years of efforts to embed local communities in a new, post-colonial structure of political entities that distances itself from the hierarchical structures of France *and* from the revolutionary, anti-tradition committees of the Sankara period (Hilhorst 2008). Following national elections in the early 1990s and on subsequent occasions, particularly in 2000–01, Burkina was one of several countries in francophone Africa to

make a strong commitment to the eventual decentralization of powers to the local and provincial level.

Decentralization is one common component in the search for 'good governance', which dominates thinking in international development agencies (Batterbury and Fernando 2006; Crook and Manor 1998; Manor 1999). Decentralization involves some divestment of authority over resources, services and/or money to local government, to elected bodies, or other organizations.<sup>3</sup> Analysis of this process in Africa suggests a formal transfer of authority can be relatively rapid, for example following the election of a village council or mayor; and yet existing social and political institutions may react only reluctantly to this new imposed order (Buur and Kyed 2007). A dissonance between formal and informal institutions, therefore, opens up possibilities for the manipulation of an ostensibly democratic process.

Political decentralization can have uncertain and contingent effects on local political institutions and resource management. Some clues about how full-scale decentralized reforms may change the balance of power and actors roles can be understood by looking carefully at the long engagement of the rural periphery with government, NGOs, and bilateral projects in rural areas. The latter have been important in their own right as agents of social change, as I have shown in the three cases above (Bierschenk et al. 2000; Laurent 2005).

Unless there is downward accountability of local leaders and checks on elites and strong political actors, decentralization risks adding another set of actors that farmers and pastoralists have to negotiate with, that they try to co-opt or bypass in order to secure access to resources without significant costs to themselves. In addition, previous examples in West Africa suggest national government often tries to make alliances with local and regional officials and elites in a way that is less than democratic, and that can lead to 'devolution, co-optation, and local elite capture' through these new political alliances (Schönleitner 2001). Those same central political elites can also try to circumvent local leaders by 'de-concentration' of powers from the political center. This process places state representatives out in rural areas, but can exclude local people and their leaders from participation in government. Ribot argued that decentralization can actually be 'a centralizing force when it takes a power that was by default exercised in the local village, and allocates it to a different or even new set of local institutions' (Ribot 1999). Today, Burkina Faso is experiencing an 'administrative decentralization' that often strengthens or reproduces top-down administration, or arguably, permits more state control in rural areas (Ouedraogo 2006). While customary control over land-use decisions has not yet been seriously challenged, property disputes have now become an issue for local government.

Formal decentralization dates to the 1990s in Burkina Faso, but the institutional history is complex, perhaps reflecting the incomplete transition

from decision making based on customary institutions to one based on legally recognized modern institutions. Almost all land is, according to the RAF, the property of the state in Burkina Faso, and rural communities have unencumbered rights to use it. In addition, there is provision to transfer land to private title or to local authorities. In 1991, a new Constitution, following Presidential elections, begun legal decentralization, and the *Commission Nationale de la Décentralisation* (CND) was created in 1994 as a non-political government entity. It took until August 1998 before the important *Textes D'Orientation de la Décentralisation* set out the right of entities to 'manage their own affairs' under a 15-year programme, and became law (Burkina Faso 1998). A further speculative document, the *Lettre de Politique de Développement Rural Décentralisé* (LPDRD, 2000) built on the *Textes*, calling for 'participatory and representative local governments and institutions planning and managing their own development programs' and obtaining resources from local revenue and government fiscal transfers. In effect, it kicked off a transitory phase of implementation, in which the '*gestion des terroirs*' committees that had emerged in PATECORE's region and several others, were given formal recognition as *Comités Villageois de Gestion des Terroir* (CVGT), by the National Village Land Management Programme (PNGT). In some cases these 3,000 committees had their own budgets, and they managed land and resolved disputes (Thiéba 2003: 21). They became 'officially responsible for the management of community infrastructures, village woodlands, pastures, fauna and natural resources in general and for allocating, evaluating and withdrawing land from the national domain' (Hilhorst 2008: 9). After a long period of national debate over decentralization, somewhat surprisingly these committees were discontinued under the most recent *Code Général des Collectivités Territoriales* (2005) and have begun to be transformed, starting in 2007, into village 'development' commissions (*Commission villageoise de développement* [CVDs]).

Local government elections were held for 302 rural communes in 2006, and emphasis shifted to the former *Départments*, such as Rollo, that have now been converted into local government areas under the control of an elected mayor. Mayors' offices have, as part of their remit, environmental management and land tenure, as well as local economic development and health, education, and civil protection. The CVDs will sit under them and may, in worst cases, be controlled by them. Their financing comes, in principle, from local taxes as well as state budgets (MATD 2008, <<http://www.inforoute-communale.gov.bf>>).

In sum, this new arrangement (with a new set of annoying acronyms) sits quite far from the lofty goals of the CND, set up 15 years ago, that called for an autonomous set of local bodies. Most of the elected mayors belong to Burkina's ruling party, the CDP, which has a strong political majority, and many of them are former or present local residents who have enjoyed

economic or political success. In many cases, the political authority of traditional chiefs has been boosted through their election into office but as a 'postcolonial transformation of political legitimacy', with some possibility of abuse of power, rather than a return to the pre-colonial order where their authority was customary and almost absolute (Hagberg 2007: 134). Newly installed as agents of the state, some mayors are now complaining that there is little flow of resources to their districts.<sup>4</sup>

For the Mossi, decentralization of this type must pose many ambiguities (Jacob 2007; Laurent et al. 2004; Sawadogo 2001). Sawadogo and Stamm (2000) reported nine years ago that there was little dissatisfaction with traditional methods of land tenure allocation among the Mossi of Bam Province, and therefore little need to formalize or modernize existing customary arrangements. The decentralization process needs to allow room for manoeuvre and for benefits to continue flowing to traditional authorities, notably chieftaincies. As Thiéba notes, localities need 'some degree of organizational autonomy' and fewer 'nit-picking regulations' coming from central government (Thiéba 2003: 23). For the new leaders aligned with the ruling party, the potential material benefits of office can be real, and this poses dangers (Engberg-Pedersen 2003; Hagberg 2007).

A group of schoolteachers I met in Bam in 2001 made a prophetic comment: that they foresaw little change in rural conditions if villages were suddenly given the right to collect their own taxes and to elect mayors or local leaders. This is because, they said, a 'democratic' or 'decentralised' local institution, in which the chief may be involved but is not the sole source of political authority, could not be guaranteed to provide any additional political or financial leverage for the community. By contrast, if unwelcome fellow villagers or 'imposed' leaders dominate local government, individuals may choose to 'opt out' and continue to use their own social networks based around kin and traditional authority. Those options are always available in a rural hinterland where land transfers are still, largely, conducted according to tradition, and opportunities for income generation are still quite small – hence the large stream of out migrants. In other words, whatever the complex structure of rural governance, localities will find ways to manoeuvre through and around them.

And yet, as long as customary leadership still plays a role, rural people seem to welcome political decentralization. The *Sankariste* opposition to traditional leaders that begun in the 1980s (Sankara's name still appears on T-shirts and posters, especially during the urban food crises of recent years) has not supplanted respect for traditional leaders and the institutions that they oversee. In the Mossi villages I know well, any attack on a respected local leader could set off more disputes than it solves unless it is unanimous. However, there will be real problems in implementing decentralization in poor or marginal regions, including in the three communities discussed above. The development challenges are enormous, land tenure is

uncertain, and financial transfers from central government – and from the local population – are bound to be slow in coming.

## Conclusion

There is an enduring stoicism on the part of rural Burkinabés towards the constellation of formal ‘rules’ governing land and administrative arrangements. The contemporary situation is characterized by a variety of social actors juggling resources and power (Lund 2008; Ouedraogo 2006). For any interventions in the management of West Africa’s drylands to be sustainable, the plurality of these local dynamics must be understood and respected (Raynaut 1997: 315). The challenge is to provide some locally-welcomed support, in the form of finance, regulatory certainty over land access, conflict management, or technical support for land management. It must be able to deal with land pressures, resource degradation, and overlapping ‘social tenures’ and forms of political organization.

For many years in rural Burkina Faso, international donors have been the main source of this support, and this has led to political games being played to capture the resulting benefits of their programs (Batterbury 2005; Engberg-Pedersen 2003). I have shown that the earlier *gestion des terroirs* approach to land management had several advantages. Indeed it was recognized and given more formal political status through the CVGT for a few years. It worked quite well in communities with a strong degree of social cohesion, and with relatively straightforward agrarian systems and land rights, as the Ibi case shows. Here, strong environmental management programs were undertaken in the context of relatively secure land rights and with full participation of customary leaders.

And yet where rights to land are contested, overlapping, and shared between multiple users and pastoralists (as at Toessin), the same environmental interventions have only succeeded because the local population took part in these activities for their own political reasons, and have used them to assist in their struggles for better community resources and secure land rights to buttress against their neighbors. The GTV approach was designed to operate as a communal activity. Its successes were permitted by, rather than driven by, the *systèmes coutumiers* – the traditional structures of power (Batterbury 1998).

And yet, things have moved on. Decentralization is the new mantra in Africa and beyond. As state-sponsored political decentralization has become more widespread, we can anticipate that the local politics of environmental management, so visible in the 1990s, are now extending to the new and exciting possibility of local representation by elected officials. While decentralization can in principle achieve benefits for natural resource management, this is unlikely to be unproblematic. The resolution of land conflicts can only be aided by devolution of significant powers to local

actors who are downwardly accountable to the local population: currently these are the Mossi chiefs. A warning is offered by the Bouloye-Tiouli case, in which the boundaries between public land and private gain became blurred. There are plenty of other cases where the accountability of local leaders is to themselves, to political parties, or to urban elites, rather than to the local residents they are supposed to be representing (Benjaminsen 1997; Engberg-Pedersen 2003; Goheen 1992; Manor 1999; Ribot and Veit 1999). Harsh (2009) details rising levels of protest against local government, with 49 urban protests in 2007 alone. He also details cases of local corruption by municipal officials, who can achieve private wealth through public service.

Nonetheless, I want to reserve judgement about the extent to which decentralization efforts are doomed to repeat some of the earlier failures of land management in Burkina Faso's history. I think that the slow arrival of political decentralization through elected officers has offered some degree of community engagement and cohesion. This was also present in the GTV approach. But sufficient government resources are not yet in place to enact the required development actions, pending multilateral loans and government transfers. The work of international projects like PATECORE, that were in the 1990s the effective external agents in many rural communities, is unlikely to be built upon by today's mayors and village-level CVDs, because both lack the funds to do so. Frankly, it is likely to be a very long time before we see a harmonious localization of development gains, given the slim possibility of raising taxation, and there is a strong possibility of politicized appointments (Batterbury and Fernando 2006).

In these debates over effective governance for the rural Sahel, it matters who *represents* the local population – and whether these leaders have local interests at heart (Berry 2000; Ouedraogo 2007; Harsch 2009). The election of local officials to a new layer of local government has been highly politicized and as of 2009 it has strengthened the hand of the ruling political party. Government functionaries, ex-functionaries, and business people have now been elected to office (Hagberg 2007; Jacob 2007: 237). These individuals have *legality*, but not always *legitimacy*, in the eyes of the local population (Ouedraogo 2006: 24). Local leadership, since it cuts across deep-seated traditions and norms, and modern concepts of government and governance, are central to all efforts to vest local resources in local communities and to create what this book terms 'Sustainable Futures'. In Burkina Faso, modernity, in the shape of accountable institutions, 'good governance' mechanisms, and perhaps even a future move towards creating a rural land market underpinned by individual titles (part and parcel of the neoliberal approach to land in Africa), are still not yet very visible in the rural communities. Many local citizens regard such imposed institutions as irrelevant and annoying (Sawadogo and Stamm 2000).

These views matter. It is in rural environments that the majority of Burkina Faso's population live their lives, often in spite of, or in ignorance of, urban political agendas that are more wedded to concepts of constitutional rights, elections, and formal political debate. The present efforts to install accountable institutions for the management of land and property will have a long struggle to assert themselves. To do so they have to work with, rather than manoeuvre around, citizens in this 'land of upright people'.

## Notes

- 1 Field research in 2001 was supported by the Crisis States program, London School of Economics (funded by DfID, UK) and earlier doctoral work from 1991–4 by the Africa Program of the Social Science Research Council (USA). A referee's comments were helpful.
- 2 This is despite the breakdown in governance in Côte d'Ivoire since 2000 and major episodes of anti-immigrant (including anti-Burkinabè) violence there in recent years. New migration streams have emerged, most recently to Algeria and Libya.
- 3 'Decentralization and devolution describe the process by which bundles of entrustments – including regulatory and executive powers, responsibility and authority in decision making, institutional infrastructure and assets, and administrative capacity – are variously transferred to local groupings, e.g. local governments or communities' (Mandondo 2000).
- 4 Funding to local government, the *Fonds Permanent de Développement des Collectivités Territoriales* (FPDCT) were only announced in January 2008. Funders are listed as the state, the World Bank, and other bilateral and multilateral agencies like the UN and the European Union (see <<http://www.matd.gov.bf>>, also <<http://www.inforoute-communale.gov.bf>>). The World Bank has a patchy history of supporting decentralization efforts in Burkina Faso, with substantial gaps in its funding history (Batterbury and Duvall n.d.).

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