

IASCP, 9th Biennial Conference

Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe, June 2002

Proposal for a panel: “West-Africa: New approaches to safeguard the environment through empowerment of local people”

Panel chairs

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Panel abstract

The panel describes a research-cum-action Initiative in Mauritania to safeguard the Sahelian environment through empowering local people to transform the present exploitation of natural resources into a more efficient and sustainable management model centered on them as key decision makers. The Initiative has relevance for the entire Sahel. The Initiative takes the following as points of departure: (i) the economic and cultural survival of people in the Sahel depends upon protection of the environment, (ii) local people know the traditionally recognized land-use patterns, (iii) some behavior needs to be changed in light of recent environmental degradation, (iv) traditional management has been corrupted by government intervention, and (v) change in culturally embedded behavior will be achieved only voluntarily, by devolution of responsibility through participation.

This simple yet radically new approach is, furthermore, prompted by the following characteristics of the Sahelian region: (i) there is rapid degradation of the flora and fauna, (ii) the public sector is unsympathetic to effective environmental protection, (iii) the legal systems are dysfunctional, and (iv) there is increased conflict between ethnic groups as well as clashes between particularly herders and sedentary farmers.

The solution lies in identifying and addressing the needs of the local people who interact directly with the environment. To influence their behavior towards sustainable environmental practices, the Initiative starts with the assessment of local practices, tracing and fixing them on maps, and screening for environmental beneficial or harmful effects. Required changes in use patterns would be negotiated with the local people until a consensus agreeable to all parties is reached.

These negotiated behavioral rules would be consolidated in regulations which are: (i) formulated by local people, (ii) in their dialect, (iii) clear, short and succinct, stating purpose and policy; (iv) simultaneously drafted in the official languages of the country, revised and edited in an itinerant process with expert’s input, and (v) conform to the objectives of international environmental conventions. The texts will be archived in the Official Gazette and on the Internet (GLIN) and also affixed on a GIS-centered geographic map. The process constitutes a legal reform that gives priority to customary law over transplanted law, thus establishing the basis for a convergence between the actual behavior of the population and the laws and regulations intended to govern such behavior.

Several partly new approaches and tools will be used, placed in an inter-disciplinary context. They include: (i) specific biotopes (such as oasis, wetlands, grazing areas, coastal areas) would be governed by specific regulations, (ii) GIS and the Internet to record laws and constitute the foundation for a modern land-registry with traditional use-right descriptions, (iii) community driven development policies would be taken seriously through re-investiture of local people with responsibility for their environment, (iv) social marketing, and (v) co-management policies on the communal level to ascertain enforcement.

Several collaborating partners support the Initiative: GTZ, the World Bank, GLIN and its technical partner NASA, and CBNRM Net. Donors operating in Mauritania will be brought on board.

The panel will report on this work-in-progress and on activities in several Francophone and Anglophone Sahelian countries that support the Mauritanian Initiative.

Papers and Participants

Papers to be presented by West-African scholars and practitioners from government agencies, NGOs, academia and donor funded projects are being identified. The following two papers are commissioned:

- Presentation of the Mauritanian Initiative – Members of the GTZ team in Nouakchott, Mauritania; and
- Overview of GLIN – Hans-Werner Wabnitz

The Partners

- GTZ – Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (The German technical development assistance organization), at: www.gtz.de
- World Bank – The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development, at: www.worldbank.org
- GLIN – The Global Legal Information Network, at: www.loc.gov/law/glin/
- NASA – The National Aeronautic and Space Administration, at: www.nasa.gov
- CBNRM Net – The Community-Based Natural Resource Management Network, at: www.cbnrm.net

A CBNRM Net's Web site, at: www.cbnrm.net/webhosting/tft/, will track overall process, including preparation, delivery and follow-up activities.