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**Sahel: Safeguarding marginal lands through
recognition of local land use rights**

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The paper addresses property and use rights in the Sahel. More specifically, it describes a research-and-action initiative in Mauritania that aims to empower local people to transform the present exploitation of natural resources into a more sustainable management model.

A number of characteristics of the Sahel region constitute key points of departure, among them: (i) the rapid degradation of the flora and fauna, (ii) the amount and level of conflict between pastoralists and farmers are increasing, (iii) local people know the traditionally recognized land-use patterns, (iv) traditional land management is corrupted by government intervention, (v) public sector activities and actions do not contribute to environmental protection, and (vi) the judicial systems are dysfunctional.

Preliminary data coming out of ongoing work by the “Technology Fosters Tradition” (TFT) initiative in selected ephemeral wetland ecosystems in southeastern Mauritania are presented and analyzed. These ecosystems are of key importance for the livelihood of a large number of people from different tribes and with different subsistence strategies. They are of crucial importance for overall ecological stability in the broader region, and have crucial biological diversity functions, both regionally and globally. At the same time they and their corresponding traditional land use systems are coming under increasing stress. The following hypotheses guide the work: (i) natural resource degradation can be countered only by changes in land use practices, and (ii) behavioral changes will occur voluntarily, following devolution of responsibilities through participation.

The TFT is managed jointly by the Mauritanian Government, the World Bank and Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), receives support from the Global Legal Information Network (GLIN), the US National Aeronautic and Space Administration (NASA), and the Community-Based Natural Resource Management Network (CBNRM Net), and is funded by the Government of Norway. The basis for the approach followed lies in addressing the needs of the local people. The TFT collects detailed data on traditional and modern property and use rights, and trace and fix them on maps, both in paper and electronic form. Use patterns are observed over time for reliability, and screened for environmental beneficial or harmful effects. These behavioral rules regarding natural resource management will, in turn, be consolidated into regulations, which are:

- (1) Formulated by local people, using the idioms of their own languages and dialects,
- (2) Revised and edited in an itinerant process with input of experts,
- (3) Clear, short and succinct, stating purpose and policy,
- (4) Conforming to the objectives of international environmental conventions, and
- (5) Translated into Mauritania’s official languages.

The resulting texts will be archived in Mauritania’s Official Gazette, made available on the Internet via GLIN, and included on GIS-generated maps. The outcome amounts to legal reform that gives priority to customary law over transplanted law. The goal with the

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overall process establishes the basis for a convergence between the actual behaviors of the local population and the laws and regulations intended to govern such behavior.

Several partly new approaches and tools, placed in an inter-disciplinary context, are employed. They include: (i) GIS and the Internet to record inter-regional agreements, use-conventions and laws; (ii) establishment of a modern land-registry with traditional use right descriptions, incorporating community- and individual rights, (iii) investing local people with responsibility for their own environment, (iv) social marketing, and (v) co-management policies at the local level to ascertain enforcement.

The TFT and its outputs are expected to have relevance for the entire Sahel region. The TFT website is at: <http://www.cbnrm.net/webhosting/tft/>.