

# POSITION AND ROLE OF PEASANT COMMUNITIES IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE DESERTIFICATION PROCESS IN THE SAHEL

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The study and understanding of the desertification process in countries in the Sahel has a very old history that can be dated back to the early twentieth century, following the great drought of 1910-1918. Like scales, theories concerning this phenomenon have swung between two explanatory poles - natural ecological development and the action of humankind - which are sometimes viewed as mutually exclusive and sometimes as reinforcing each other.

In this paper our interest in this development will focus primarily on the position to be given to peasant practices at this time in analyses of the process of desertification and the formulation of strategies to combat it. We feel that the appropriate position is due neither to the chance results of scientific discovery nor totally to that of simple economic conditions but is based rather on profound factors that define a genuine view of the world that characterizes both academic research work and the work of taking action with respect to the communities. We shall have to explain why today people are 'discovering' the ability of the peasants of the Sahel to combat desertification. We shall conclude by noting some consequences of the research done in the field of development generally and the struggle against desertification in particular.

## The Position and Role of Human Beings in Explanations of the Desertification Phenomenon in the Sahel Countries

There is no consensus to explain the phenomenon of desertification in the Sahel (Kotchi 1986; Freudenberg 1988) and it can be seen that the debate revolves

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around three distinct positions, which are historically dated and each of which gives a different place and role to the rural populations of the countries concerned.

The oldest of these explanatory theories views the desertification process in the Sahel as a phenomenon caused by natural ecological catastrophes resulting from a series of periods in which there was too little rainfall which contributed to the advance of the Sahara Desert.

This explanation dates back to the early twentieth century and may be found especially in the writings of the colonial powers in the region. Its origins appear to lie in the major drought that lasted from 1910 to 1918, whose effects were exacerbated by the droughts of the late 1930s and the early '70s. The explanation is based on a converging series of data ranging from the disappearance of forest cover to famine. In this theory, human beings are victims confronting a global phenomenon that is beyond them. In this case, possible deleterious reactions to the environment by individuals and village communities are viewed as secondary acts caused by the desertification process itself. Thus, if human beings help in some of their actions to amplify the effects of the phenomenon, they do not cause it and could not, even potentially, find a remedy for it.

From this perspective, the struggle against the desertification process, an inevitable natural phenomenon, must involve a transformation of human activities that are clearly deleterious to the environment into actions designed to do the minimum harm while slowing the process as much as possible. The other kind of action, which seemed at the time to be most promising, was to act directly on nature in such a way as to transform it through mega-projects, of which the great dams policy is most typical. Clearly, the primary participants at this level are financial institutions from outside the region and the central governments of the countries affected by the drought. People in the countryside are totally excluded from things, except as the target population of strategies devised without any consultation with them.

While this kind of explanation is still very popular with the general public and amply covered by the media and certain development organizations that play on the emotions of the public in the developed countries by depicting the African communities as totally passive and, in essence, desperate, the scientific world has generally noted the weaknesses of this approach.

The second type of explanation is based on a finding that the countries of the Sahel are overpopulated with people and animals. This explosion in human and animal populations makes excessive demands on natural resources, especially the forests and the soil. The finding that the desert is advancing at different rates seems to support this argument to the extent that environmental deterioration is

more pronounced in the most highly populated areas (World Bank 1987).

In this connection, rural populations and their flocks and the constantly growing urban population are the primary agents responsible for the phenomenon of desertification. Action must not therefore be limited to dealing with nature itself but also and above all with the communities, in a way that reduces the human and animal population burden and introduces more effective technology in order to increase productivity.

As in the strategy linked with the previous argument, the main protagonists in the struggle against desertification are the governments of the region and financial institutions in the developed countries. The people of the region, to whom the guilt is assigned, must be the subject of large-scale programs ranging from emigration to southern areas of the Sahel countries to an in-depth restructuring of traditional agricultural and pastoral systems.

These two deterministic views of ecological development, which see it as the result either of the inexorable development of nature itself or of human and animal pressures, have been criticized for not taking into account all the conditions that affect ecological deterioration, namely climatic, political, economic, demographic, historical and other factors. To some extent this criticism favours a holistic approach.

The third view, which is more subtle than the two we have just considered, maintains that the desertification process is the result of highly complex relationships between natural and social phenomena. The starting point of this explanation is the hypothesis that ecosystems in the Sahel have experienced disturbances, some of which have had environmentally degrading effects while others have had regenerative effects.

Depending on the climatic changes and human actions, semi-arid ecosystems may change from grassland to brush in a few decades. The fundamental idea behind this thesis is the often transitory nature of most ecological realities. Of course, such elasticity is not felt to be unlimited. The difficulty, then, is to determine the precise limits beyond which the regenerative process may no longer occur.

The position given to the role of people in this hypothesis does away with the deterministic and globalizing aspects of the previous theories. The impact of people's actions is not seen *a priori* as necessarily negative. This evaluation of practices takes into consideration a conjunction of the impacts achieved by the many factors acting on a specific localized ecosystem (these factors may be local, national, regional or even international in origin). It cannot be said on this view that rural populations are systematically made out to be the guilty parties, although

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it is recognized that some of their practices are no longer suitable for the new environmental conditions.

With respect to the actions favoured by this approach, like those favoured by the others, it will be seen that the peasants are constantly marginalized as potential protagonists. Even when they are included in planning, they are simply given the task of implementing projects formulated and designed without any consultation with them.

Because this last theory could have resulted in active participation by the communities, which are not considered *a priori* to be responsible or to be confronting a natural phenomenon that is beyond them, it deserves serious consideration. In fact, a systematic study of the situations in which human action combined with other factors has contributed to regeneration of the environment would have seemed logical. This was, however, not done. It is only recently that the question of participation by the people has become more than a slogan or a rhetorical necessity to be included in any application for aid made to institutions in the North. Today, finally, effective participation by the people affected is seen as a decisive factor in the struggle against desertification, both in terms of analyzing the problems and of the strategies to be defined and implemented.

Our object here is not to make an exhaustive study of the attempts based on these three ways of viewing the problem. Suffice it to note some of the main features of the various approaches so that we can understand the place given to rural communities in the Sahel.

A typical example of failure in these projects based on technological input and the exclusion of peasants as decision-makers was reported by Kotschi (1986), referring to Winckler (1982). In 1962 a large-scale anti-erosion project was implemented in the Yatenga region of northeastern Burkina Faso. This project specifically included the construction of small dikes. The local population was systematically excluded and it was expected that the results would be sufficient to persuade the peasants to follow the example set.

It quickly became clear, however, that the peasants were not interested in maintaining these small dikes which had been erected without any regard for the traditional organization of the space and land ownership and they were even less willing to imitate this technology, which challenged their whole way of life. The experiment was abandoned in 1967. The lack of interest shown by the people, combined with a technology whose effectiveness had not been proved, had the effect of exacerbating the erosion in the area of the experiment and this erosion later spread to neighbouring areas.

This bias in favour of marginalizing the people affected did not change very much following the United Nations International Conference on the Environment held in Nairobi in August 1977 (United Nations 1977). Although one of the recommendations stressed the needs, wisdom and practices of individuals, most of the 28 points gave a key role to technocrats and the governments of the Sahel countries; these were given the task of transferring methods and technologies for the sustainable use of the land to the rural populations. Without going into details concerning the implementation of this program, we can note that, as in earlier policies in the struggle against desertification, the results were disappointing.

Today this view seems to have been rejected or at least radically changed. It is necessary to explain why. We need to show first that these changes are not simply new approaches to the aim of combatting this phenomenon but rather involve other challenges that go much deeper. These should now be analyzed.

### An Ideological and Political Struggle Through Interposed Paradigms: the Consequences for Research

Social phenomena are always analyzed in a context that is characterized by a number of competing paradigms. A paradigm is essentially an articulated set of presuppositions that direct the research toward certain hypotheses and questions and certain research methods. Moreover, each paradigm tends to deny the validity of all others. In the natural sciences, one paradigm holds sway at any given time and debates and disputes among researchers take place within this paradigm until another comes along to dethrone it. In the humanities, however, disputes do not take place solely within the dominant paradigm but also among various paradigms that coexist at any given time.

George Ritzer (1975) relied on Thomas Kuhn's (1970) theory of paradigms. We shall adopt the idea that there are three competing paradigms in the humanities: the social fact paradigm, the social definition paradigm and the social behaviour paradigm. In what follows we shall not consider the last of these, which attempts to apply the instruments and logic that prevail in the natural sciences to social knowledge. Research falling within this paradigm attempts to recreate social situations in the laboratory in which it is possible to control the variables that are considered to be relevant. It is clear that this paradigm has not had any marked impact on the problem of desertification. However, the other two paradigms require all our attention. In fact, they form the basis of the methodological approaches that have determined past and recent research into the problem of desertification, among others.

Until very recently the dominant paradigm was that of the social fact, which was

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based on the fundamental principle of Durkheim that social facts must be examined as things. An affirmation of this immediately raises the question of the objectivity of research because it is implied that it is possible for the researcher (who is, after all, a social being) to stand back completely from the social context under study: this separation between the researcher and the subject of the research with a view to objectivity constitutes what may be called an epistemological break. This can be achieved either by means of a methodology that is *a priori* considered to be neutral or on the basis of a theoretical framework that claims to reflect reality. This paradigm stresses the need to quantify things and to maintain, by means of techniques considered to be neutral, that objectivity which is the key to knowledge.

This also has the effect of placing the researcher in a separate sphere where objective knowledge is shorn of all the artifices of parasitical social influences on the problem under study. Thus, the researcher finds him- or herself imbued with knowledge in the strict sense and, as a result, is best placed to suggest appropriate solutions to resolve the problem under study. Communities, on the other hand, which are viewed in the complex light of social relationships in the broad sense, are unable to achieve this pure knowledge. Thus, they cannot be given a role other than that of implementers.

To the extent that the researcher's training and vision were determined by the areas of specialization in western institutions or those run along western lines, the approach usually involved a single discipline. This academic training often prevented the researcher from seeing the unexpected and did not necessarily direct the expert toward significant research work on the ground aside from the inevitable questionnaire distributed in haste by teams of investigators. To support this statement, we merely need to note how many researchers made recommendations devised without any direct contact between the senior researcher and the area studied.

The rational strength underlying the strategies resulting from this research, the formal rigour of which guaranteed their scientific validity, led all researchers to regard actions that did not exactly follow the pre-established plan as irrational. This way of looking at things has dominated the development process until today, especially studies of and actions taken to combat desertification. In short, the quantitative methodological equipment that was used made it possible to devise rational strategies to combat desertification that were developed without the participation of the communities, which were felt to be incapable of gaining access alone to the prior knowledge required to formulate strategies. This was the golden age of the expert.

Did this paradigm gain predominance because of its effectiveness? We merely

have to note the many failures in the programs that grew out of it to realize that the explanation for this predominance must be sought elsewhere. We must also stress the convergence between ideological factors and political interests.

Ideologically speaking, there was first the idea that traditional African societies were incapable of undergoing change alone without running the risk of destroying themselves. The organization of these societies was felt to be both simple and rigid, and such that changes in their environment could well have a domino effect and create an imbalance that would make the social structures and practices that had not been geared to the new situation dysfunctional. This explains the perceived need to import solutions designed outside these communities. This view also complemented the view inherent in the theory of modernization, which predicted the disappearance of traditional society in accordance with a linear concept of development.

It was clear at that time that the developed West had become a reference point and a source of knowledge to meet Africa's needs. The feelings of superiority of the western 'civilizers' and their African counterparts educated in their institutions must be seen in this light. As Hugues Dupriez has said:

The civilizers' feelings of superiority did not make room for a precise detailed study of cultural systems invented and constructed by the indigenous peoples. While it was necessary to keep them alive, if for no other reason than to feed the work force, they would be of no interest in the future. This was based on the imposition of colonial values and agricultural modernity was necessarily modelled on the productive methods of farming practised in the mother country. (Dupriez 1986)

Farmers were judged to be "incompetent, irresponsible and clearly headed for self-destruction, unless they were taught to act like their western counterparts" (Harrison 1987: 302). This view, which came into being during the colonial era, has broadly survived to the present day, despite thirty years of political independence.

Politically speaking, African states have had the thorny problem of trying to create a nation-state and establish their political dominance against other forms of power that still persist. This political action was accompanied by economic programs that also sought to promote government control. Moreover, this control over their communities formed part of a global development plan designed, it must be admitted not very successfully, to bring about the internal economic integration of social formations that were highly dependent on the economies of the North.

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What emerges from this paradigm is an idea of global development based on concepts that function essentially at the macro-economic level. It is a simple task to deduce a rationality of action from this analytical rationality. There is then a danger of formalism, which the concept of a 'top-down' development strategy has not been able to escape.

Today a new paradigm is needed in Africa: that of the social definition, which is finally achieving predominance after playing a subordinate role. Unlike the previous paradigm, the social definition paradigm gives the key role to social protagonists. Their actions can be explained only in light of the definition they give to the situation with which they are faced. From being objects, individuals become actors located in an extremely rich social context in which they will find elements to enable them to create definitions and the actions based thereon.

One of the decisive consequences of such a paradigm is that, for any strategy and any action to succeed, it must be constructed and thought out with the active participation of the people to be affected in such a way as to include every aspect of their society and to take an approach that is necessarily holistic. The narrow specialization of experts becomes dysfunctional in this approach, which, in the circumstances, can be implemented only by multidisciplinary teams.

Although quantification is not completely excluded from research that claims to take this approach, it should be noted that qualitative data play the main role to the extent that certain factors based, for example, on culture cannot be quantified without a risk of reductionism, and because direct and extensive human contact that will allow for a multi-dimensional analysis is preferred.

It is primarily to ideological and political factors that we must look in order to find the reason for the change in the predominant paradigm, as we did to explain the domination of the social facts paradigm. We should first note the intensification and deepening of the dependence of African countries. Because of their international debts and their many failures with respect to the goals they have set themselves, the western powers have imposed radical strategies for change on their African counterparts. With the implementation of structural adjustment programs, the state, despite itself, frees up civil society and leaves it with unprecedented room for action. The call for democracy, which is spreading throughout Africa, must be understood in this context. Following a long period of particularly authoritarian government intervention, the move toward democracy is to some extent a prerequisite for any action in civil society that goes beyond a specific reaction and genuinely forms part of the process of national change.

This new paradigm also lends interest to what some have called the African specificity, that is, specific features of local culture. The all-encompassing vision

of the previous paradigm is followed by a relativist vision that takes the specific as the starting point for any reflection or action. This relativism has made it possible to assert and take into account, among other things, the difference between the kinds of reasoning used by the groups at the heart of the research. For example, the reference system of a western economist and that of a peasant from the Sahel are often diametrically opposed: the peasant in the Sahel wants to *be* while the economist feels that he should want to *have*. The ultimate goal of the peasant in the Sahel is not appropriation of material goods; his essential quest relates to the multiplicity of social relations that condition his social status and the forms of security he needs in the long term. In his way, the peasant in the Sahel is a *homo economicus* but a *homo economicus* who bases his actions and strategies on social choices (Gueneau 1986).

This recognizes at the same time that it is usually absurd to claim to judge development projects solely with the tools of classical economic analysis, for example. African peasants live their own values and their forms of conduct are in harmony with them. They do not necessarily fit into our schemes. And it is often laughable to observe them through a magnifying glass that distorts them and is incapable of presenting a true image (Gueneau 1986). Moreover, the fundamental ideas of dominating nature and of controlled, planned and uniform development in keeping with the western view contrasts with the value system of rural Sahel communities, which prefer to emphasize harmony within nature.

This new paradigm gives us a better understanding of the errors and failures of past policies. It leads researchers to prefer participation by the peasants at various levels in formulating and implementing projects. It also has the effect of breaking the academic framework of research geared toward pure knowledge and definitively introduces the idea of the required solution to be applied to the problems experienced by the communities. In the current context of decentralizing policies, we can discover the potential of peasants and also the consequences of their participation on the approaches to and objectives of research.

The choice of the second paradigm will lead the research community to observe phenomena that have hitherto been ignored or underestimated.

### Mobilizations, Organizations and Changes in the Sahel Countries

There is a Baoulé proverb which says: 'Strangers have big eyes but they don't see anything. Strangers see only what they know.' In fact researchers and decision-makers must do away with attitudes that are deeply rooted in their view of things and replace their certainties with a spirit of discovery. A number of researchers have already begun this process, which first of all involves leaving the comfort of

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bureaucratic institutions and heading out to work 'on the ground' together with the people in a spirit of openness and learning. They do not need to do this without theoretical tools but they must be prepared to test them against reality.

This open-mindedness and jettisoning or questioning of *a priori* assumptions have made it possible to find many examples of actions taken by the peasants themselves to combat desertification. We should note that the peasants are well aware of the crisis situation in which their region finds itself; indeed, they did not wait for us to take their practices and their definition of the situation as subjects of research before attempting themselves to combat the desertification process and its effects on the basis of their empirical knowledge of the environment. What is encouraging is that the most enterprising among them take the initiative, despite a socio-economic situation that is not necessarily favourable to such commitment.

We cannot claim completeness here and it will suffice to present a number of examples illustrating the variety of responses by communities in the Sahel. This reality must also be taken into account if a start is to be made on effective action.

There are many illustrations of this spirit of initiative. We could refer, for example, to the community management of renewable natural resources in Mali. At the workshop on desertification organized by the IDRC in Dakar in September 1991, Mr Propé Daou, a member of the *Institut Malien de Recherches Appliquées au Développement* (IMRAD, the Mali Institute of Applied Development Research), showed that peasant practices went much further in managing renewable natural resources than the government program, which was designed to implement pilot projects in test zones representative of the agro-climatic, socio-economic and cultural situations in Mali.

To illustrate his argument, Mr Daou presented three examples relating to the management of fishing, stock-raising and agriculture. In all three cases the people themselves tried to organize to deal with the challenges posed by the more or less direct consequences of desertification: the migration of foreign peoples and pressure on resources, the increased burden of stock-raising on limited spaces, reduction in the number of drill sites in the dry season, brush fires, erosion and so on. In the three cases presented the people applied coercive regulations for the responsible collective management of resources. These were based on tradition but implemented in a spirit of adaptation. They involved creating popular tribunals responsible for applying regulations, which were accepted by the communities, relating to fishing, access to water and management of local natural resources generally. Very often, moreover, this organizational work initiated at ground level was able to include resources available in local administrative institutions as well as in several NGOs.

The results of these measures differed, depending on a number of variables including attitudes of co-operation or opposition in neighbouring communities and the effects of social dynamics internal to the communities. Beyond the immediate achievements of the measures, we should note above all the spirit of initiative displayed by these communities.

However, the struggle against the effects of desertification does not necessarily concentrate solely on those that occur directly in the arid areas but also on its more or less direct effects in, for example, urban areas. It is important to note the development of family market gardens and the expansion of orchards, especially on the edges of urban areas. Moreover, enhanced use has been made of lands located near water sources on river banks, near lakes or in those areas where ground water is easily accessible. Individual access to these lands, which were previously under-used, is still often organized on the basis of traditional solidarities. We should, however, note the appearance of a class of merchants and officials who, since they are financially well off, cash in on access to the land and invest in this flourishing area of the economy.

In Senegal, the existence of a market has encouraged communities and individuals to invest in the production of trees such as the neem, which is used in construction. In areas of the Sahel it is the Senegalese acacia and the jujube that are marketed and purchased by the Peuls, who use them to fence in their plantations to protect them from roaming animals.

We should also mention the dynamic role played by a new kind of investor although this has not yet been studied systematically. Village-dwellers in the mid-Senegal Valley have organized to create and exploit small areas of irrigated land. This initiative was primarily the work of émigrés who, following more or less lengthy stays in Europe, returned home with capital. The village-dwellers quickly understood that they too could organize to construct dikes and develop lands by pumping water and thus obtain higher returns than were obtained by traditional subsistence and rainy-season cultivation (Giri 1983).

These examples go to show that individual or community action cannot be limited to tradition alone. On the contrary, we see developing in both rural and urban areas, new trends that are full of hope. But we should also note that in some cases they are an added burden for the most disadvantaged groups. For example, it has been noted that politically and economically dominant classes have seized land that was in the past collectively owned and this has sometimes led to the impoverishment of the least advantaged classes who are deprived of their means of access to the land. In Burkina Faso, for example, large traditional families have monopolized access to the low lands on the Yatenga, which were previously under-used, and have converted them into mango orchards, thus depriving low-

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caste families and migrants of access (Marchal 1980).

It should also be noted that tradition in the static sense could not meet all the new needs resulting from a global situation that is to a large extent unprecedented. It is also probable that some forms of tradition, which were adapted to an ecological environment that is now under threat, if it has not already been radically transformed, will be totally dysfunctional and have to be abandoned. The problem of change and the related problem of innovation then arise.

For a long time now rural societies have been held to be traditional and consequently incapable of changing from within. The diversity in their practices and knowledge was reduced to a homogenous whole that was archaic and primitive. In fact, any unitary notion of the peasant world could only be an ideological construction. The term peasant covers a very broad range of historical, cultural, social and national situations. Today traditional society in the narrow sense no longer exists; rather, it is a definition, as Balandier has said, that provides a mirror image of industrial society. All societies change and are accordingly touched by modernity, no matter what form this may take.

Furthermore, we should not view the introduction of modernity as antithetical to the structural logic of rural societies. In fact, in so-called traditional cultures social changes may occur without difficulty since there is no written record which, in a bureaucratic state, gives greater weight to past and present structures, laws and norms. Resistance to change, when it occurs, must be explained on the basis of other variables. We must radically question the image of an unmoving rural environment, frozen in customs handed down by the ancients. Experience shows, on the contrary, that rural societies are at the cutting edge of innovation, albeit not just any innovation. Peasants are not *a priori* reluctant to accept change, as we saw earlier; usually they do not have the means to afford to innovate. Any change involves risk, and the peasant is not able to take this risk. Rejection of change is not therefore a question of mentality but rather the result of a rational calculation.

Nevertheless, many achievements at the local level are innovative. They often involve original ideas or original ways of using tools or materials, or may take the form of a material that is new to the country or region. For example, in Senegal windmills were introduced into the market gardens in several areas. They were warmly welcomed after early disappointment resulting from a motor pump system that was always breaking down. This technology proved to fit the meteorological conditions and the operating costs are virtually zero. In other market gardening regions in Senegal, the introduction of a well-digging system that used tubes piled on one another enabled the peasants to extend their fields. A large area had previously been watered by wells dug in hollows with no reinforcing of the sides and that constantly had to have the sand removed from them. In the Rebeuss

district of Dakar blacksmiths developed the Sakkanal stove, the round shape of which had the virtue of reducing the loss of energy transmitted by the fire during cooking and thus reduced wood consumption.

Beyond these more or less isolated initiatives, however, we should note a phenomenon of the greatest importance, namely the organizational capacity of the communities in the Sahel. This associative phenomenon plays a major role in the struggle against desertification and involves a structure that must be taken into account now by any serious policy for action in these communities. Associations exist in both the rural and urban communities. They operate at different levels. Village or community groups act at the local level and also maintain and strengthen the links between village communities and their members who have emigrated to the cities. Genuine solidarity networks have developed through which material goods, capital and even individuals circulate. These associations initiate local projects, usually with the support of national, regional or international NGOs. Whether they are from the North or the South, these NGOs have led peasants to join forces and organize in structured groups. The power of these village organizations is a counterweight to the classical authorities. The vacuum left by the state thus favours the emergence of bottom-up initiatives.

Unlike those institutions that were created by the state in the past, the principles of the local NGOs are supposed to have deep roots in the communities although without being a copy of their tradition. The assets that NGOs are normally regarded as having are well known: a good knowledge of the community, actions based on responses to demand in the villages, assistance to supplement the efforts of the people, emphasis on assistance for the most disadvantaged social classes, local potential put to good effect, training of beneficiaries and minimal operating costs. Without denying that these factors are present in many NGOs, we must note that this picture is far too optimistic. Studies of NGOs show clearly that they quickly increase in number and that, as a result, not all the above qualities are necessarily combined in each of them (Gueneau 1986).

The social vacuum left by the state in crisis has become a place where voluntary organizations can multiply and, by virtue of their numbers, participate in a system of bitter competition for the available funds that are constantly growing smaller because of the crisis in international co-operation. This has the effect of making many of these NGOs fiercely independent and sometimes even isolationist, notwithstanding that they do not always have the necessary human resources for such independent action.

A balance sheet of their activities also shows that status as an NGO does not necessarily guarantee a good knowledge of the environment or a desire to allow the communities to participate effectively in projects. In this regard, we should

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not generalize. However, we would agree with Freudenberger when he said:

The increasing role of lenders and Sahel voluntary organizations in development is a positive factor although it does not provide a panacea. Many of these technical, organizational and administrative problems that affect Sahel governments and multilateral and bilateral donor organizations recur in these new institutions. Growing pains occur to the extent that the private voluntary organizations become more involved in the complexities of revenue-generating activities. (Freudenberger 1988: 53)

Having said this to avoid indulging in a rather naive rhapsody, we should add that NGOs are in the best position to carry out or initiate genuine participatory research, which is the unavoidable key to any workable form of struggle against desertification in the Sahel.

In a remarkable book, R.M. Rochette (1990) reports a score or so of successful experiments in co-operation between NGOs and village communities in various countries of the Sahel. These experiments underline the varied nature of the actions taken: construction of gabion microdams in Niger and Mali, and of small dikes in Mali, Burkina Faso and Niger, collection of run-off water in Burkina Faso, stopping sand dunes spreading in Senegal and so on. He concludes:

Experience shows that, as in the past although now in a new context, *this [village] community is able to organize and manage the defence and restoration of its environment*, the reconstruction and enhancement of its potential usable water and soil resources.

This ability must be *assisted* rather than confiscated or diverted by development projects and services. This assistance is necessary in providing and implementing technical proposals that can be reproduced or mastered by the population. It is also *jointly* necessary in informing, forming and promoting the abilities of the community to design, organize, manage and decide on the actions to be undertaken. (Rochette 1990: 550-551)

This organizational capacity has had a definite impact on organizations that, although official, have found much room for manoeuvre in the current economic situation. The case of the CILSS is instructive.

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The *Comité Permanent Inter-états de Lutte contre la Sécheresse dans le Sahel* (CILSS, Standing Inter-State Committee on Combatting Drought in the Sahel) is a sub-regional organization created in 1973 by six member states (Burkina Faso, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Chad and Senegal) in order to combine their efforts in dealing with the drought and its devastating effects. In 1977 Cape Verde and the Gambia joined, as did Guinea-Bissau in 1986, which brought the member to nine. After allowing its mandate and strategies to develop, the CILSS has tried since 1989 to implement the Ségou strategy for the management of village lands in the Sahel. This strategy favours participation by the people of the Sahel in the management of the land in such a way as to control local development and claims that this will come about if community organizations are given greater responsibility.

It was in this spirit of giving the peasant movement greater responsibility that one of the most original NGOs came into being: the international *Se Servir de la Saison Sèche en Savanne et au Sahel* (6-S, Use the Dry Season in the Sahel and the Savanna Association). One of the objects of this association is to slow the exodus of young unemployed people during the dry season by creating activities for them in the villages. This NGO, which is funded by many international lenders, is available to village organizations that have come together on a regional basis to form unions. These unions then conclude agreements or form federations that are members of the association. In 1988 the association included 3,695 village groups joined in 85 zones in six countries: Burkina Faso, Senegal, Mali, Mauritania, Niger and Togo. In 1989 6-S included 115 zones in nine countries.

One of the most innovative aspects of 6-S is that it belongs to the peasants themselves. At the beginning of each dry season the association makes available to the zone committees a sum of money without knowing ahead of time what these funds will be used for. The zones use these funds as they think fit to meet the needs of the various groups and in line with criteria that ensure responsible management. Confidence in the peasants' ability to manage their own projects lies at the heart of the 6-S approach. This philosophy has had the effect of unleashing the creativity of the peasants because of the increased self-confidence of these people, who were for too long considered by the outside world to be incapable of finding solutions to their problems. A Mali peasant has put this very picturesquely but accurately:

It is as if a man tried to put a heavy weight on his head but it is too heavy; he can never lift it above his belt. Then 6-S gives him a hand and helps him to put it on his head. But he must bear the weight himself. This weight is development. To develop takes a very great effort and nobody can do it for you...

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'6-S' was created to help the peasants develop productive activities during the dry season. It is up to them to find out what they want to do. If the suggestion comes from outside, it will never work. The peasants are perfectly capable of organizing. It must come from them. They must also become more aware of the fact that they have a lot of work to do. Too many men are still unemployed during the dry season. (Pradervand 1989: 169)

Despite the obvious successes, we must guard against an enthusiasm that would cause us to lose sight of the real problems that appear in 6-S associations. We might mention, for example, delays in repaying loans intended for projects designed to make a profit, the rapid growth in certain federations, some of which privately consider 6-S to be a never-ending source of funding that can be used for activities that have nothing to do with community interests.

All things considered, it is possible that the most important role of these peasant associations is the highly essential one of providing a space for peasants from different backgrounds to meet and exchange ideas. This makes it possible to go beyond the limits of specific projects and to implement a genuinely collective experience where each community can benefit from the successes and failures of all the others. Only through these communication vectors can concerted regional action take place.

In Burkina Faso the revitalization of a traditional young people's organization, the NAAM, made it possible effectively to combat some of the effects of the drought during the dry season. The basic idea is to 'develop without destroying' by enhancing and using as much as possible knowledge and technology already familiar to the community. The training given must always be that which is requested. It is given by example, thanks to the involvement of teachers from the villages themselves who have come through the NAAMs and received appropriate training. The members of the NAAMs can show a peasant how effective a given technology can be and they help him master a technology he himself has chosen, while trying at the same time to maintain and improve their own technological resources. To expand this picture without necessarily completing it, we should also include other peasant organizations such as FONGS and CONGAD.

These peasant movements and their networks have grown and spread throughout the Sahel. They are supported by NGOs in the North in a genuine partnership to the extent that these associations are held to be legitimate spokespersons for the peasants of the Sahel. Thus, after being marginalized, the peasant in his groups is now becoming the bearer of the hope that we shall one day witness a mastery of the environment that goes beyond a purely technological approach. This brings us to other instruments that have been used and that are based on the knowledge of

the peasants, the nature and position of which must now be defined.

### The Position of the Peasants' Knowledge in Development

After being marginalized for a long time, the peasant has now become, at least in the eyes and increasingly in the actions of specialists, the key figure in rural development generally and in the struggle against desertification in particular. This statement brings us back to the vital problem of describing the real place of the peasant in the process of research and action. This problem affects the nature and effectiveness of the peasants' knowledge and especially their status in relation to scientific knowledge.

One of the arguments for marginalizing the peasants was that their knowledge was of no use in a crisis situation such as existed in the Sahel. Only scientific knowledge was felt to have the flexibility and, when all was said and done, the purity conferred on it by a methodology that was totally lacking in ideology. To some extent, knowledge becomes an end in itself responding to an internal logic. The peasants' knowledge, on the other hand, was the product of an empirical view conditioned by and geared toward criteria that had nothing to do with scientific method. These criteria were social, economic and political in nature and meant that the peasants' knowledge could not be assessed by the community that was implementing them in terms of its own 'objective' merits. This explains why some forms of behaviour were described as irrational when they were assessed in light of the criteria applied to the evaluation of scientific knowledge.

In fact, this argument does not stand up to the most superficial analysis. In the second part of this paper we showed that scientific knowledge was not an island cut off from the rest of society, as it claims to be. The domination of paradigms is the product of political relationships just as much as, if not more than the result of efficiency alone. In this sense the total dichotomy between peasants' knowledge and scientific knowledge must be rejected and any analysis of the relationship between them must be more subtle.

Like scientific knowledge, peasants' knowledge includes socio-cultural, political and ideological dimensions. A peasant's daily life, which is the framework within which his practices occur, is not governed by the criterion of technological efficiency alone; it also involves a whole set of considerations that must be known if we are to understand the logic underlying the peasant's behaviour. Everyone knows that peasant societies are places in which there is profound inequality and places where a past that is often very rich conditions the present. The social hierarchy determines both the peasant's place in society and the framework in which his practices and thus his knowledge arise and develop. Similar points could

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be made about researchers, their societies and the scientific knowledge emerging from their practices, which itself is strongly conditioned by society in the broadest sense.

In order to understand the specific nature of the knowledge possessed by peasants, we must consider the relationship between knowledge and action. It is true that scientific knowledge often finds practical application but this is not in any way necessary. Research time and action time are generally separate and the responsibility of different specialists. The division of labour is profoundly characteristic of scientific research. Peasant knowledge, on the other hand, exists through and in practice and, in the narrow sense, does not have a separate existence. In this regard it may be legitimate to speak of know-how without any pejorative meaning in this term. The peasant at the same time both one who searches and one who does. While scientific knowledge is geared primarily to generalization on the largest scale possible, the relevance of peasant knowledge is usually confined to the life-span of a community. The role of national or regional associations is precisely to break through these limits and to give the knowledge possessed by peasants a chance to spread as far as possible. In fact, an extension of the space in which peasant knowledge circulates is already a fact. Today multi-ethnicity and movements of individuals are common in rural areas; new protagonists are involved in village communities and peasants' knowledge has thus found a means to propagate itself. Needless to say, we should encourage and support a systematization of the dissemination of this information through organizations. In addition to the historical background and the internal structure of these societies, an exchange of peasants' knowledge is also a factor that will influence strategies for combatting desertification.

As we noted earlier, change and innovation within communities form part of the natural order of things. But forces from outside these communities also come into play. Some work at the national level while others play a global role. Their impact is not totally risk-free for the knowledge possessed by peasants. In the societies of the Sahel that are in crisis, dependence on the market, administrative regulations and climatic conditions seem to doom the practices and knowledge of peasants to disappear in the short or long term. It is in the most fragile ecosystems such as the Sahel that this threat to knowledge and societies is most obvious. In effect, the peasants' knowledge is constantly at the mercy of contradictions between the forces of change present in any society, which often transcend the purely local framework, and the forces that tend to maintain the *status quo*, which are usually local and condemned to constant compromise.

It must be understood that the idea of change here, which in our judgment cannot be avoided, does not presuppose a positive or negative judgment on these changes. We feel that the peasants' knowledge has a decisive role to play. However, we

must refrain from a form of fetishism that would today give them all the virtues that they were claimed in the past not to have. Their knowledge does not constitute a universal panacea for all problems. The argument made most often for praising the knowledge possessed by peasant societies is that it is the result of long experience of the environment and that it represents a perfectly adequate adaptation to their environment. As we have already noted, this ignores the fact that there are societies that are not, or are no longer or are not yet adapted to their environment.

In this sense, we will not necessarily find all the solutions to the problem of desertification in the knowledge possessed by peasant societies. The negative image of all knowledge at any given time provides a measurement of ignorance. This ignorance, like knowledge, will definitely have an impact on certain aspects of good environmental management, the assessment of certain cultural methods that are no longer adapted to an environment that has been disrupted and of those new ones, on the other hand, that are likely to meet the needs of the environment and of people. Peasants themselves are aware of this fact since they are among the first to assert a right to knowledge and training. It is only at this price that the peasant world will be empowered. Access to political power, which is crucial for the future of the peasant world, is deeply dependent on this knowledge.

The crucial point is that knowledge is always acquired on top of other knowledge. In this sense, as has been pointed out by Bonfils, there could be no training without a support activity in which the new knowledge is set beside the peasant's knowledge until the issue is resolved:

The support will consist, for example, in assisting the village dwellers to give content and form to their intentions; it will involve discussing the choices to be made, for example, with respect to the possibilities of one specific culture in contrast to another culture (comparative information on plausible returns, water needs, marketing possibilities ...), on the possibilities offered by a given method of distributing water (information on watering or irrigation, depending on the nature of the soils, slope, investment and operating costs, the quantity and quality of human and animal work required...).

This information support will also relate to possible management methods, together with their advantages and disadvantages, to be offered to villagers for consideration. (Bonfils 1987: 198)

On the basis of this work peasant knowledge can be enriched and become a tool

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by which the peasants can participate fully in the decisions concerning their own future, as well as at of their community and even of their region.

### Consequences for Research and Development

Given the generalizations required by development ideologies based on consensual presuppositions, either at the micro or at the macro level, we feel that we must look to what might be called the anthropology of development, which takes the complexity of society as its starting point.

As we noted earlier, a community's struggle against desertification involves the divergent interests, strategies and logics of the various groups involved. Does this mean, however, that each local situation, each operation, has its own specificity and that no generalization is possible? If we answer this question in the positive, we opt at the same time for a plethora of specific projects the regional effectiveness of which may be in doubt. As a matter of fact, the answer is more complex.

To be sure, each concrete situation is a unique combination of specific elements. Beyond this singularity, however, there are certain constraints that are common or similar to a region as a whole or at least to a large number of communities that live there: the same ecological conditions, the same type of involvement in the regional if not the global economy, the same political system, the same crisis and so on. Moreover, it is the symbolic, social or economic logics that intersect most often. We should not lose sight of the fact that the problem of desertification is a regional problem.

These situations require comparative research and a contrasting of experiences. It seems to us that, since peasant organizations, in co-operation with national and regional NGOs, have proved themselves, they could become the forum in which this takes place with the full participation of the peasants and their spokespersons. However, it would be a mistake not to include government institutions in the strategies to combat desertification on the pretext that civil society needs a certain amount of independence. In our view, this would be to underestimate the extent to which government decisions still affect the life of communities today and the extent to which the role of government as a potential tool of the popular forces for change may be important for the future of societies in Africa.

It is therefore essential to involve government and non-government institutions so as to ensure that the communities' actions are co-ordinated to some extent. Current economic conditions allow the communities and the organizations that represent them to benefit fully from the relative independence they enjoy and to

have a real influence on government policies. These economic conditions are favourable to genuine development from the bottom up and at the same time to empowerment of the communities. However, it is not necessary to assume that this will take place without any reaction from those social classes that have hitherto monopolized government power for their own benefit. The current fight for democracy in Africa is part of this struggle.

Environmental policy failures in the past resulted primarily from a misunderstanding of peasant structures, a marginalization of rural populations and unsuitable technological proposals that were imported without consultation from outside the communities. Research must follow a new path. It must involve the peasant from the time the problem is identified to the time when research programs are implemented and assessed. Starting with the finding that peasant activity is not merely economic but also social in the broadest sense, we must take a multidisciplinary approach to research questions. This applies to much research being carried out at this time in the Sahel by both government and academic institutions, especially in the field of production systems, such as the rural development project in Maradi, Niger (Reynaud et al. 1988).

We share the opinion of Marie-Christine Gueneau:

I believe that it is the human bedrock that must be considered. The state of village dynamics and the blocks. The strength of peasant initiatives and their conflicts. The conditions of change. It is good to know the production of a market garden but it is better to know how the peasants reached it. If we know where they came from, we shall understand just how far they are capable of going. (Gueneau 1986: 10)

The Seminar in Nouakchott of 1984 proposed six fundamental strategic options along these lines that we consider to be more timely than ever:

- participation by people
- a global approach
- development of the territory and planning
- institutional support and services
- the functions of research, training and follow-up
- co-ordination and strengthening of assistance. (CILSS 1984: 6)

We must also be on our guard against hasty assessments categorising a project as successful or a failure. In fact, it is high time that we ask what a successful project is. This question refers us again to the concept of empowerment, for which there is no really good equivalent in French.

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A project that produces only poor physical results is not *a priori* a failure if it enables the peasants to organize and gain experience in taking the initiative. Such a project has the merit of breaking earlier wait-and-see approaches and the attitude of dependence that in the long run merely reinforces the processes of domination over these communities. This release, which leads to an increase in self-confidence and an increased awareness of one's own strength, this dynamic awakening and promise for the future, is more important than a spectacular but fleeting achievement owed to the technical advice of an expert from outside the community.

The question that then arises relates to the researcher's place in the process, or perhaps we should say the researchers' place given that the multidisciplinary work favoured here will be carried out by teams of specialists in the absence of generalists. Some researchers such as Chambers, who is a specialist in 'rapid rural appraisal', take this logic to the limit. On the basis of his own research experience in India and various African countries, Chambers concluded that peasant populations were able to carry out most research activities for themselves. Thus, the researcher becomes a kind of animator and resource person who, where necessary, guides the members of the communities. Chambers claimed to be highly sceptical about the possibility of harmonious co-operation in the research process between researchers and members of the communities. The more co-operation there is between the two, the less the communities will participate in the long run. He maintains the idea that peasants are the only real experts in multidisciplinary matters because of their day-to-day experience with all the realities of their environment.

In our view, this argument errs in providing an insufficiently critical vision not only of peasants' knowledge but also of their practices. In our judgment, it is an error to maintain that the researchers should resign. Their role is crucial but different in nature from what it was in the past. From acting as a *deus ex machina*, the researcher is becoming a factor in a whole, namely the team which participates in research activity. He certainly does not lose his particular expertise but he must share his actions and his ideas with other researchers who are experts in areas with which he is not familiar, and also, and above all, with the community associations and the peasants themselves who, in the final analysis, must make the choices.

This approach involves frequent contacts and a sharing of the conditions of life in the village even if only for brief periods. This is a decisive factor in the establishment of fruitful relationships. It is important for the researcher to listen and not to put him- or herself in the position of someone bringing a ready-made product that the communities have no option but to accept. Rather, at first he or she must ask questions that will get people to express themselves and debate the

problem under study. In a word, it is necessary to create a true partnership. It must be said that in this work the NGOs have been more successful overall than researchers from the academic community.

Lloyd Timberlake from Earthscan stresses the fact that very often participants in NGOs have neither any particular expertise nor any experience of the technologies relating to work on the land. The reasons for the success of the NGOs are contained in the 1984 report of the United Nations Environment Program:

In some respects, NGOs have been the most effective agencies in the campaign against desertification. Dozens of them around the world have become involved, above all in field projects such as tree-planting and soil and water conservation.... Their high record of success is related to the small-scale and local direction of their projects and the requirements for local community participation, as well as their flexibility in operation and their ability to learn from others' mistakes. The dominance of field activities gives these actions an impact out of proportion to the money invested. (Timberlake 1985: 216-217)

An important aspect of a researcher's work is that he must enter into the peasants' time frame. He must learn to take time over things. Mr Blaise Ouédraogo of SPONG in Burkina Faso notes that on the occasion of a project participation by members of the community varies for many reasons that may be economic, political or socio-cultural. This diversity also appears in the adoption of popularized techniques. The appraisal of any new technique can be carried out through the prism of the peasants' empirical knowledge. As far as techniques of combatting erosion are concerned, the peasants accept them only on the basis of confirmed results. In this sense we must expect gaps between training and the adoption of the technologies because a test period is necessary so that the peasant can be convinced of the effectiveness of the innovation.

### By Way of Conclusion

Because he is at the centre of the strategy in the struggle against desertification, the peasant is recognized not only as the key actor in this process but also as the creator of solutions in the course of this struggle.

According to a citizen of Burkina Faso, quoted by Pierre Pradervand:

The peasant is not opposed to new ideas but it is the way in which the ideas are presented that counts. It is necessary to

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realize first of all what the peasant *is*, what he *knows* and what he *wants to do*. His knowledge must be respected and we have to know what he knows. When the peasant's knowledge is respected, this will lead him to create. The peasant has a spirit of creativity if he is given responsibility. He is brave if he is given responsibility. He is convinced if he is given responsibility. In order to achieve proper development, we must first know the peasant. Only then can we work with him. If we give the peasant responsibility, he will achieve miracles that we cannot even imagine. However, if we dominate him, he will allow himself to be dominated. He will hold back at all times at every moment because he has been so exploited in the past.

He concludes by noting:

Because in the past new ideas were imposed, they could not be accepted. Everything was done in an authoritarian manner. The peasant was never asked for his opinion. However, he has his dignity. He must be respected and listened to. It is only because he does not show any reaction that he will be said to be conservative. In reality, however, peasants love and want complete responsibility. (Pradervand 1989: 105)

Participation by the people of the Sahel in the struggle against desertification requires the support of their community. Today in the Sahel there is an organizational ferment that provides a clear demonstration of this desire for participation.

It would be dangerous, however, to marginalize the state in this process on the pretext that we are refocussing the role of peasant and pastoral communities. In fact, it is imperative for the state to act in co-operation with community organizations so as to change its policies concerning aspects of the social order that are a very heavy burden in the struggle of the communities against desertification. We are thinking here in particular of problems relating to land.

Many studies and reports show clearly that the actions involved in combatting desertification (reforestation, restoration of pasture-land and so on) are often blocked or at least handicapped by land ownership regulations. It is urgent that legislation governing this subject be passed so that the fruits of the ecological struggle will go first of all to the communities and individuals that initiated the struggle.

It would be naive, however, to think that changes in government policy will come

about simply on the basis of reason. The political struggle is an indispensable fact in guiding change. This struggle of the communities through their organizations and spokespersons is sustained by the self-confidence regained, the feeling of being able to make themselves heard and, above all, the recognition in themselves of the ability to innovate in order to apply solutions adapted to the considerable problems of desertification. Recognition of these qualities by the peasant and the research community as well as the training and education acquired in participatory research and action will help to complete the cycle of empowerment in communities of the Sahel.

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