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Glenn Brigaldino, European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), Onze Lieve Vrouwegplein 21, NL-6211 HE Maastricht

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**Cheikh Bâ**

## Rural Development in Africa South of the Sahara: Some Methodological Reflections

A meeting on the problems of rural development and agriculture such as this offers a welcome opportunity for throwing a critical light on some vital issues. Being aware that in sub-saharan Africa development efforts have failed to meet most expectations, I would like to raise five points that have come to my attention when looking for answers to these findings.

### 1) Top-down approaches obstruct the consideration of the rural, often illiterate population's concerns

For a long time the rural populations were treated as "objects" of development rather than subjects, maybe due to their inability to speak French (English), the foreign language, which nevertheless dominates discussions on development issues at all levels. Reflections, evaluations and designing new perspectives take place almost completely outside the world of the people concerned.

Donors and government services alike tend to focus on a logical framework that concentrates either on productivity or technicality, in total contrast and opposition to habitual ways of doing and managing things sanctioned by the people.

- Normally one finds nationwide just one uniform credit system which does not take into account any local differentiations.
- The programmes of water and agriculture management seldom integrate traditional, widely diverse production systems; thus, the effort to produce more rice makes them ignore other options for crop production (maïs, millet, niébé) or the improvement of cattle-breeding; legitimate interests of cattle-breeders are not respected (f.i. securing tracks for the cattle) and therefore conflicts between cattle-breeders and farmers continue.
- Training programmes for farmers are often standardized, and leave out completely all local knowledge and know-how. Standard topics are being treated and techniques are diffused in a top-down fashion without any previous experience regarding their applicability. This may cause either acceptance or resistance that again obstruct any innovation, even when its relevance has been generally affirmed.



## 2) Often we do not know where exactly we put our foot

Haste and rashness mark the installation of many projects, and little is known about the economic and social environment of the people. I want to illustrate:

- Nowadays, for the implementation of their programmes, the "developers" want to work with "groups", ("groupements") or similar organizational forms. Often such groups are created or initiated from outside, as a reaction to a fashion and/or boom. Thus in Senegal the co-operatives or other producers' associations were mostly government fabricated entities, whose competencies and working mechanisms were defined without them. Although very few of them are still operative, they often serve as counterpart organizations for a large part of external co-operation and assistance.
- Formerly, before the creation of these "modern" structures, we knew of traditional organizations cultivating the principles of mutual assistance and solidarity: these organizations were in charge of common fields, they installed health infrastructures, wells, schools in an effort to improve the life of the people. Certainly, these organizations have been insufficiently valued and recognized. Today, because of the impact of the crisis, they have lost much of their effectiveness.
- Whether traditional or modern organizations, we must seriously question their present-day relevance as regards their contribution for reaching the given development aims. Are they really representative of the people? Do they have the capacities to act for the people and take upon themselves their multiple and diverse interests?

These ideas, it is true, have already begun to motivate some development agencies/organizations to look out for new orientations in the quest of sustainability. They have managed to combine elements of traditional organizational forms with modern types of basic organizations that seem to be able to evolve their own identity and perspectives, and to handle their tools. I here mention the Fédération des Organisations Non-Gouvernementales FONGS or associations supported by ENDA-ACAS in Senegal as positive examples. Because of their knowledge of the local environment, they indeed induce innovations and improve living conditions in the communities, thus becoming really professional agencies. Much of this is due to their negotiating capability.

## 3) North-South Co-operation needs new orientations and demands institutional support of local NGOs and the recognition of African Know-how

A number of support organizations have been created by knowledgeable Africans. They have sometimes accumulated much experience as regards interesting methodologies and generally know extremely well the world in which they work. It would be beneficial to them to be allowed more exchange of experience, and to get support for the diffusion of their methods to local associations actually involved in development work in the field.

The NGOs of the North ought to lean on these African NGOs in order to avoid the risk of formulating projects without sufficient local knowledge. This all fits into the strategy of "decentralized co-operation" which is urgently needed.

## 4) The scarcity of options causes isolated and often badly concerted actions

Africa is facing most serious threats, be it drought, advance of salt, wind erosion. To these are added man-made environmental destructions. Normally, African agricultural systems are complex, englobing agriculture, cattle-breeding, fishing, etc., but they are now being reduced to great simplicity by focusing on just one activity, which again increases the speed of environmental damage. As a consequence the main concern is just to secure survival, and the short-term strategies applied for that end are often incompatible with sustainable solutions.

## 5) Research on participative methods has to continue

The way in which most studies are conducted: rapid, standardized and vertical – explain the amount of mistakes, imperfections and superficialities encountered when speaking of the socio-economic framework that determines a particular population's ways and behaviour. This type of studies make evident two poles:

- active pole: (the agents/trainers); it is they that initiate the questions; it is they who analyze the answers, classify and exploit informations, formulate and evaluate a project and work out further perspectives;
- passive pole: (the population); it is reduced or contented to just react upon being asked questions.

This scheme has prevailed for a long time: these days, more and more is being done to take seriously the participation of basic communities. Methodologies that have to do with participation are generously being propagated.



Unfortunately, this is often entrusted to agents who have been trained in masses, and who do not know how to adapt these techniques and tools to a particular situation in a given context. The wide diffusion of a technique seems to be more important than the objectives of development.

To conclude, it seems that all difficulties mentioned above centre around *communication* as a key element in the work on development strategies. There is no solution to any problem in development work to be found which does not clearly demonstrate the need for better and permanent communication between the partners involved. But, even if we manage to agree on the need for better concerting our diagnoses, we still meet with mental distortions when making the choice of how to correct the many systems that do not work and failures, at all levels. By pretending that the acuteness of the problem exceeds the peasant's knowledge, those on the look-out for solutions systematically leave out the people concerned.

It needs meetings between contractual partners and "partisans of development" to ensure the necessary strengthening of participative methods.

## Abstracts

*In Afrika südlich der Sahara werden viele Programme zur ländlichen Entwicklung in Orten und von Menschen entworfen und bewertet, die völlig außerhalb der Welt der Betroffenen leben. Die modernen Strukturen, die entstanden sind, stammten zum größten Teil vom Staat und sind auf vereinfachte technische Ziele ausgerichtet, wie Produktivität. Die komplizierteren traditionellen Systeme werden entweder nicht beachtet oder verfielen. Die wichtigste hier gestellte Frage lautet: Repräsentieren diese Strukturen, modern oder traditionell, die Betroffenen tatsächlich? Es wird eine Verbindung von Elementen traditioneller organisatorischer Formen mit modernen Typen von Organisationen (wie NGOs) vorgeschlagen, damit sie in der Lage sind, ihre eigene Identität und Perspektive zu entwickeln, und zu professionellen Agenturen werden und Innovationen induzieren und Lebensbedingungen verbessern können. Afrikanische NGOs dieser Art sollten von Geberländern unterstützt werden, um sich lokales Wissen zu sichern und eine „dezentralisierte Zusammenarbeit“ durchführen zu können. Da Kommunikation bei dieser Vorgangsweise ein Schlüsselement darstellt, sollten partizipative Methoden neu formuliert und erforscht werden.*

*Many approaches to rural development in sub-saharan Africa are formulated, designed and evaluated in places and by people completely outside the world of the people concerned. Modern structures which emerged were largely government fabricated and targeted to simplified objectives of a technical*

*nature, like productivity. More complex traditional systems were either disregarded or fell in disuse. The major question raised concerns whether these structures - modern or traditional - are truly representative of the people. It is suggested that elements of traditional organizational forms are combined with modern types of basic organizations (like NGOs) in order to be able to develop their own identity and perspectives, to develop into professional agencies for the inducement of innovations and the improvement of living conditions. Such African NGOs ought to be supported to secure local knowledge and to implement "decentralized co-operation". As communication is the key element participative methods should be reformulated and investigated into.*

*Cheikh Bâ, Conseiller Méthodologique, Dakar, Senegal*