

Cotton Sector Reforms in West and Central Africa

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It has been a productive and eventful year for all researchers involved in the project on Cotton Sector Reforms in West and Central Africa, which is part of the wider Africa Power and Politics Programme (APP), of which the Center for African Studies is an institutional partner. As coordinator of four country teams as well as lead researcher of the Mali team, I have certainly been very busy. In March, we expanded our research to Cameroon and welcome our new collaborators from the national *Institut de Recherche Agricole pour le Développement* (IRAD). They join our teams based at research institutes in Benin, Burkina Faso and Mali.

In May, I convened our annual meeting in Niamey, Niger with the invaluable help of our host institution, also an APP partner, LASDEL (*Laboratoire d'Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local*). Besides exchanging preliminary findings and planning the work ahead, we had the unique opportunity to participate in four days of training in a qualitative and collaborative research methodology called ECRIS, which has helped reinforce the teams' capacities. In July, I went to Mali to start the second phase of fieldwork, where I interviewed main stakeholders in the capital, Bamako, and visited two villages in the Kita cotton region, meeting with farmer cooperatives and discussing changes since last year and the emergence of new solutions. At the end of September, I attended a meeting at the Overseas Development Institute in London with other researchers working on cotton sector reforms; and then proceeded on to Paris, to present our preliminary findings to both the Consortium Advisory Group



and the Management Board of the APP Program. Meanwhile, fieldwork in our four countries is ongoing, with the goal to capture the key phases of the current agricultural year.

Our four countries, which are among the largest African cotton exporters, have been involved to a different degree in reforming their cotton sectors, historically characterized by a state monopoly. Their distinct responses to donors' pressures for reforms and to internal governance challenges represent a very interesting setting for conducting a comparative analysis of how key elements in a country's political economy affect policy processes and outcomes in vital economic sectors. Our findings show that political and social realities, as well as past experiences in dealing with specific economic challenges, affect cotton sector performance more than the formal market structure in itself (monopoly or liberalized market). Potential explanatory factors include: nature of the democratic state, patterns of rent distribution, the political weight of farmer unions, the relationship between union leaders and

their base, and the ability of farmer cooperatives to solve collection action problems.

Our objective is to analyze in a systematic and rigorous way the role of these factors in order to shed better light on the actual forces behind different degrees of market performance and arrive at a finer explanation of what is happening on the ground. Our ambition is to engage ongoing policy debates, in West Africa and beyond, with policy recommendations that take better account of local dynamics and their potential for affecting outcomes in key productive sectors.

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