

Institutions, Power and Norms in African Cotton Reforms

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The objective of this research is to identify “governance that works” within African productive sectors, by examining the potential role of hybrid institutional arrangements and unconventional reform paradigms as a valuable and recognizable resource for development. It does so by undertaking a comparative study of recent and/or ongoing reforms taking place in the cotton sectors of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali and examining the complex relationship between reform policies, the dynamics of social norms and institutions, and developmental outcomes.

This project represents one of the research streams undertaken by the African Power and Politics Program (APPP), a research consortium funded between several research institutions and individuals spread across three continents, and of which the Center for African Studies is the only US-based institutional partner. The main objective of the APPP is to produce research that contributes to a better understanding of how formal and informal institutions work and interact in African societies; examines how local norms, practices, and beliefs may positively shape development policies and outcomes; and, ultimately, change perceptions about modalities of good governance in Africa.

I chose to focus on this particular productive sector for several reasons. First, having done research in Mali for several years, I am aware not only that cotton is a main economic export for this and neighboring countries, sustaining millions of small-holders and their families’ livelihoods, but also that it shapes much of rural life, defining collective identity, pride and beliefs. The distinctive know-how and the established practices around cotton production and allied activities, which are found both within rural villages and in the relationship with extension agents and decentralized government authorities, represent a set of collective resources that merit to be closely examined. Second, cotton reforms are still current or very recent events in the three chosen countries, thus providing an excellent opportunity to witness in real time how various powers and interests play into these countries’



main economic sector.

Finally, cotton sector reforms raise some very fundamental questions about the balance of responsibilities between the state, the private sector and cotton farmers’ associations; about the trade-off between market competition and coordination; and about the type of rural development envisaged for the vast areas concerned. Given the high and multiple stakes in these delicate decisions, the study of cotton sectors in these three African countries is expected to yield invaluable insights into the role of collective values, informal institutions and local political realities in supporting (or alternatively contrasting) different solutions and arrangements for the sector.

As a research coordinator for this project, I spent a considerable amount of time in the last months to identify research teams in the three countries, think about the most appropriate methodology for pursuing our research questions, and start fieldwork. I am very pleased I can rely now on a solid network of cotton experts, almost all of whom are West African nationals. Other key collaborators for the project are: Bouréma Kone in Mali (*Institut d’Economie Rural*, Bamako, Mali), for the Burkina Faso team: Dr. Jonathan Kaminski (Department of Agricultural Economics and Management, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel) and Dr. Yiriyibin Bambio (Department of Economics, University of Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso); and for the Benin team: Dr. Borgui Yerima (*Laboratoire d’Analyse Régionale et d’Expertise Sociale*, LARES, Cotonou) and Fabien Affo (*Laboratoire d’Etudes et de Recherches sur les Dynamiques Sociales et le Développement Local*, LASDEL, Parakou, and Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Université d’Abomey-Calavi).

In order to foster collaboration within and across teams and give more visibility to the project locally, I organized a workshop in Bamako, Mali, on May 18-19, to which I invited my collaborators from the three countries, as well as a number of key stakeholders in the Malian cotton sector. This was an excellent opportunity not only for us researchers to exchange information on research progress and decide on the next steps, but also to participate in, and witness, some hot debates on policies, reform principles and underlying ideologies.

Besides organizing and attending the workshop, I spent the rest of my time in Mali this year conducting

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some fieldwork, which was then continued by my Malian team, locally coordinated by a researcher based at the Institut d'Economie Rural. At the village level, we conducted both focus group discussions with cotton farmer cooperatives, and individual interviews with farmers, extension agents, and other key local actors. We found there is a surprising variety across villages in the types of issues farmer cooperatives face, such as high debt, a collapse of trust and cooperation, and inadequate access to extension and training. The set of resources available to each village to surmount these difficulties seem also to vary, yielding a more complex picture of the actual situation in cotton areas than that often portrayed in the capital.

We also conducted fieldwork in Bamako, where we interviewed key stakeholders in the government, producer organizations and civil society, heard their positions in the reform debate and their views about cotton sector directions and prospects, and discussed political realities and influences, social norms and values. There are definitely positive forces for change in the Malian landscape

that are not properly harnessed by those who seem to make most of the decisions. The next objective for the project will be not only to continue to observe how things evolve in Mali in the immediate future, when a number of important steps will be taken, but also to compare the situation in Mali with that in Burkina Faso and Benin, in order to learn about other countries' experiences of dealing with similar issues, and ways in which solutions may, or may not, emerge from within existing collective resources and values.

Veronique Theriault, a doctoral student in UF's Food and Resource Economics Department, is assisting with this project and came with me to Mali last May. If you want to know what she thinks about this experience, check out her description in the student section of this report!

Renata Serra is a Lecturer in the Center for African Studies. The research described is part of a larger project on African Power and Politics (APP), which is funded by a grant from the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID) and Irish Aid to a consortium of which CAS is an institutional member. For more information, go to the APPP website, www.institutions-africa.org.