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IMPLEMENTING LOCAL PARTICIPATION: THE NIGER RANGE AND LIVESTOCK PROJECT

by Dan R. Aronson

What happens when local participation in development, so enthusiastically called for in the abstract, is actually attempted at the level of a single development project? In this paper I explore some of the conceptual, ethical, and structural ambiguities of the practice of participatory development as they emerged in a single project. The project, the Niger Range and Livestock Project (NRL), was a joint effort of the Government of the Republic of Niger and of U.S.A.I.D. (see USAID 1977). The lessons it teaches are of much wider importance.

The project was designed in 1976/77 and implemented from 1978 to 1983. The Sahelian drought was over and the emergency responses were winding down. Governments across the Sahel and external donor agencies assisting them were engaged by 1976 in planning for what they all hoped would prove to be permanent improvements in the rural economy. Huge sums of money were becoming available to fund projects in every sector of the economy and social services. The will became at least the route marker toward the deed, and terms and project names like "drought-proofing", Sahel Vert and Tapis Vert began to be heard.

For the agricultural zones of Sahelian countries standard 1970's-style rural development projects came into vogue. They commonly established specialized provincial-level project management organizations to deliver seeds, chemicals, credit, extension, and sometimes animal traction equipment and cooperative input supply and marketing arrangements to village farmers. Although these projects fell far short of the hopes planners pinned to them, their design and operation were at least familiar, having been borrowed from agricultural projects in higher rainfall areas. For the pastoral zones of the Sahel, there were no such models. Earlier "ranch" projects had failed, while projects that involved intensive or semi-intensive supplementary feeding programs made some sense in agricultural areas (where by-products were available relatively cheaply) but were questionable under range conditions farther north.

This lack of available project models was just one reason for caution in the design of pastoral projects in the Sahel. Two other factors prejudiced many governments and agencies against patience with pastoralists at all. First, pastoralists were in almost all cases "outsiders" to government authorities, both in their being ethnic minorities (WoDaaBe Fulani and Tuareg) and in their being migratory and thus "superfluous" to any given local planning area. Second, in the analysis of the drought, pastoralists loomed as desertifiers - the fathers rather than the sons of the desert - and therefore as needful of salvation from their self-destructive ways. Pastoralists did not have problems, they were problems, at least in some of the documentation of the post-drought period.

In this context, the creation of a participatory, beneficiary-oriented, and socially sensitive development project was quite surprising. The NRL project became possible because of the confluence of yet other factors of the late 1970's development style



and of conditions in the Republic of Niger. First, government officials in the Livestock Service and in the Ministry of Rural Development were refreshingly frank in admitting they had little knowledge of the pastoral zone of the country and fewer clear ideas as to what to do about "their" nomads. Yet with a large influx of Malian Tuareg, the increased value of uranium and other mining in the north, and signals of subversion from neighbors to the north, Niger was willing to treat delicately and earnestly with its pastoral peoples. The Government of Niger (GON) was not rushing to sedentarize nomads for the sake of political control, and indeed was seeking just the opposite goal, the reconstitution of herds and the herding way of life for people many of whom had been temporarily settled in refugee camps as a result of the great drought of 1969-1974. Second, the GON put no special premium on the project's supplying meat to Nigerien urban markets. Most of Niger's non-dairy livestock products (hides, skins, meat on the hoof, pack and draft animals) were exported, and it was to resuscitate this previously-thriving trade that the project was seen to contribute. The GON therefore had no particular wish to revolutionize the nature of production or to press the "rationalization of resource use" that elsewhere threatens pastoralists as they get yoked to economic service (see, e.g., Awogbade 1981). Third, the 1970's foreign aid climate urged all project work to recognize the needs of local people, and by 1976, USAID in particular was insisting that "social soundness" complement technical and economic feasibility in the fundamentals of project design. Fourth, the passing of the drought emergency and the availability of substantial funding allowed planners to conceive the future as a longer-term process of incremental possibilities rather than a crisis requiring a quick fix.

In this atmosphere of technical and informational uncertainty, benign concern, and a rather naive confidence in the perfectability of development practice, the NRL project was created. The Nigerien government had designated as the locus operandi a vast zone in the center of Niger, virtually all of it north of any but spotty catch-crop agriculture. The zone was historically Tuareg, with a southern fringe of servile Bouzou millet-growing villages; a southwestern margin of Tuareg splinter groups interdigitated with independent farmers; a "port" city of mixed population, Agadez, from which cross-desert transport was launched to north Africa and to the salt mines at Bilma; and a vast core area of grassy steppe on which dozens of different Tuareg noble, religious, and vassal herding clans raised, subsisted from, and exported camels, goats, less sheep and a few cattle. (For a fuller description of the zone see Bernus 1981:11-52). Into this zone during the twentieth century have also come Fulfulde-speaking cattle herders from the south and southwest, first as guests at (and later purchasers of a few) Tuareg wells, and then, because all land was declared "public" by the French colonial government, into areas near government-dug wells and pumping stations.

The project was committed to a consultative and participatory style from the outset. The USAID mission had already done some reconnaissance surveys among nomadic camping groups before the project was designed, using two ex-Peace Corps Volunteers who had earlier, during the drought period, worked in refugee camps. During project design two anthropologists, Marianne Rupp and myself, were retained at different stages to travel among the pastoralists and help elicit from them their perceived needs and ideas as to how a project could aid them (Rupp 1976; Aronson in USAID 1977:137-157). Once the project had been approved, several Peace Corps Volunteers were assigned to it to begin work on a number of themes which included baseline research on land and water use patterns. Next (after a delay), a senior anthropologist of the Tuareg was retained for permanent work implementing the project, and he in turn came to oversee four field anthropologists and others all working both to research production patterns in the zone and to build upon that local

knowledge a series of pilot actions for change after thorough discussion with those who would be involved. At first in negotiating the design and then during the high period of implementation from 1979 to 1982, both local people in the countryside and Nigerian technicians and administrators played active roles in defining the scope and priorities of project activities.

One rendering of the project "story" might thus be a narrative of thorough-going "participatory" or "collaborative" development. Another interesting version has been told by John Curry, one of the project anthropologists, as a Rashomon tale of "negotiating development," wherein multiple divergent expectations and cultural images collide as the work struggles forward (Curry 1984). Here I want to emphasize instead the difficulties that project organizers and implementers had in pursuing a strategy that they defined as participatory and that they judged as desirable. If we are to design tools for development, socially validated strategies of action, then experiences like those accumulated in the NRL must be sifted for guidance for the future.

THE STARTING BLOCKS: DESIGN BIASES

Obviously, from the first moments of project conceptualization, the choices of design strategy, of concrete intervention, and of institutional framework begin to bias the directions in which a project will move. In the case of the NRL, two central substantive issues arose at the very outset that pose questions for a strategy of local participation. The first had to do with the needs of the people of the project zone, with ascertaining what they thought a "project" should provide. The second concerned the "units" under development: whether they were individuals, ecologically-defined micro-systems or prior administrative groupings; this was a question that would help determine even who was spoken to about development needs. In short, project designers had to decide whom to talk to and what to talk about. I will point out why the second of these questions, what to talk about, is prior.

LESSON 1. The directive to ensure "local participation" provides insufficient guidance to project design. It is about channels of information, not content. As mentioned above, during NRL design two brief missions went into the project zone to discuss with pastoralists what sort of project might be desirable. The first anthropologist, Marianne Rupp, had extensive Sahelian experience during the drought emergency, and her report (1976) emphasized problems of individual recovery of food supplies, herds, and health.

My own visits several months later were organized intellectually around questions of ecological stress, and were oriented to systemic "needs", to long-term problems of range sufficiency, herd growth, markets, population pressure and development services. My questions were in a sense more "academic" in eliciting discussion of less immediate issues, less "basic human needs". Each of these two approaches was valid, and the (different) groups of pastoralists Rupp and I talked to were articulate to both levels (and would have also been so at others). Both of us may have coopted people to speak to "our" issues, though each of us was sensitive to encouraging discussion that was "free" (of course it was no such thing, being bounded by all kinds of mutually-hazy knowledge, expectations, and perceptions). What is important here is that the different kinds of discussion had fundamentally different implications for the components of intervention that would soon be built into the project. Rupp's project would have emphasized social services, non-pastoral jobs, and food relief, but I was involved in final project design and so production issues gained a larger role. (There

is a lesson in this about "clout" that is also an obvious but important one). The imperative for consultation with potential project beneficiaries was crucial to an outcome which realistically addressed any needs of local people, but which needs were addressed depended upon which questions the outsiders asked.

LESSON 2. Communication is power. Project designers were well aware that talking only to government-recognized chiefs and notables, even to a general class of "elders", would bias the discussions toward the needs of people already well positioned in local structures. Out of purely external ideologies, both Rupp and I diversified our interlocutors: we wanted to talk to both Tuareg and Fulani, to women, to younger herders, and to people of low status locally. Local people might or might not have urged us to do so anyway, but we did it ex ante. Getting them onto the speakers' list, and therefore their issues onto the agenda, was an act of cultural and social bias that had long-term implications for project execution.

The most important of these questions had to do with the importance given to Fulani in the project area. On the one hand, everyone acknowledged that the zone was historically Tuareg. Bernus (1974) has written about the way in which colonial water policy exacerbated ecological problems by inducing more animals into the zone and focussing them on public pumping stations. Ethnically that immigration was of WoDaaBe Fulani nomads. Should a project meant to enhance pastoral production in the zone include Fulani as beneficiaries, or remove them as interlopers? In any case, an argument was also possible that Tuareg themselves had become, in this century, more livestock-dependent than they were before, and that a reinvigoration of the regional economy might entice Tuareg back into commerce and transportation. There was no easy answer as to who the beneficiaries of a livestock project really should be. In those circumstances, it seemed best to follow the lead of the GON, which of course had to treat with its citizens where it found them. But getting Fulani written into the project itself was consequential for the social history of the project, as we shall see.

PROJECT TAKE-OFF: BIASES BY INCEPTION

Designers of range livestock projects have always been under strong pressure to institute some form of control over livestock numbers on given pieces of territory. In Africa, government and group ranches, rotation schemes and grazing reserves have been frequent but ineffective measures for doing so. In opposition to such external controls, anthropologists have argued that indigenous societies have had range controls all along, that they have evolved as managers of a common resource and have not just engaged in a spiral of greedy consumption against all others like them (see Horowitz 1979:27-46, Sandford 1983:118-121). NRL designers benefitted from this discussion, and sought to institute a mechanism whereby local management styles could first be elicited by research and then be enhanced by support and services. The method was frankly experimental: no codified management system such as that recorded for Mali had been reported in central Niger. The idea was to hire project staff social scientists who would experiment with different sorts of groupings in order to find - with them as central participants - the best approach to an integrated, socially well-rooted resource management strategy.

LESSON 3. As the twig is bent, so grows the branch. The project zone is organized in ways both congruent with and cross-cutting of ethnicity. On the ground, many Fulani and Tuareg share wells and the surrounding rangelands; Tuareg entrust cattle to Fulani stock partners; both Tuareg and Fulani face livestock markets

dominated by southern Nigerien merchants. On the other hand, with minor exceptions the GON administers Fulani and Tuareg separately, under chiefs who report directly to post and arrondissement commanders. Language, dress, history, religion (for the most part), and production emphases differ markedly.

The cross-cutting relationships seemed important enough, in terms of range development issues, to be worth using as frames for organizing new approaches to resource management. If the project could involve all the people who shared a set of resources in micro-planning their own future, then perhaps self-run management plans could eventually spread across the countryside. In other areas, social patterns might suggest parallel but homogeneous structures federating, as needed, not only Tuareg and Fulani but different status or clan segments within those broad ethnicities. Indeed in some discussions pastoralists themselves had said that joint management issues were important, but that outsiders would have to raise them because any insider would be deemed to have ulterior motives.

All this conjecture proved premature. Neither the GON nor local descent groupings of pastoralists were willing to consider new associations that cross-cut older units, at least not in initial stages when the whole idea of services brought directly to local levels was new and untested. The GON wished to preserve existing lines of authority, while the NRL itself was very hesitant to move boldly to the formation of local associations at all. Having begun a program of research on social and economic aspects of production set up in terms of existing groups, NRL staff later came to see them as the "natural" units on which to base association formation. New forms are still not precluded, but the experience here was that the formats in which dialogue began (over research issues) became those to be used later on (for associations). This inhibition of alternatives is a form of experimental bias that may not be entirely necessary. To avoid its effects, however, would have taken deliberately de-constructive effort that the project staff felt not worth the risks. That there were long-term consequences of the choices made in the first stages of the work demonstrates the ways in which social commitments grow, and puts a higher premium on being very careful to get the first choices right in projects with a participatory strategy.

LESSON 4. Communication is power (again). NRL design and implementation staff were committed to working with any of the populations of the pastoral zone. USAID project design guidelines require that project interventions be replicable after the end of the U.S. assistance at acceptably low cost, and project designers distinctly foresaw herders' associations spreading across the zone, each engaged in veterinary outreach, livestock production extension, cooperative marketing and other activities. Existing administrative channels communicated information and collected taxes but had few service outreach functions, so what was being adumbrated was a very much enlarged field of interaction between government and pastoralist. Adoption of the associational format would be open to all, and would lead to much more horizontal (or lateral) information flow as well, as extension messages, market forecasts, and other news were passed along denser networks.

Both the GON and pastoralists balked at these visions. For the GON, informal lateral communication was a fact of life, but formal communication that was specifically focussed on government services risked being uncontrollably politicized. Proposed experimentation with citizens' band (CB) radios among associations was therefore rejected in the design phase. Recently, as the project progressed through a second phase (and renamed the Niger Integrated Livestock Project, NILP), the implications of having associations across the zone has also struck the GON as having

high political potential, and the earlier license to experiment has not been converted into a general license to organize the countryside.

Adoption by pastoralists of the format of herders' associations also ran into problems. These had to do with Tuareg sensibilities to the inclusion of Fulani in the project at all. Not only had Fulani been deemed full citizens of the zone, legitimizing their "squatter" origins, but in the mix of research commitments and pilot activities, the Fulani seemed to be coming out ahead. Although research had begun in both ethnic groups, and was led by an experienced Tuareg specialist (Jeremy Swift), the cohesiveness of the team members working with Fulani gave their activities greater visibility in the research and then a clearer thrust forward as the first pilot associations and veterinary and human health services were started up. Along the way there had been an allocentric joking relationship among the various researchers, as they collaborated and competed over the relative importance of their issues and "their" local groups. Tuareg were struck by the "equal time" given the Fulani, and as project implementation wore on the image grew in some quarters that this was a project "for the Fulani". Other authors have also remarked that project intervention adoption rates are constrained by the networks over which information travels: in this case the full participation of Fulani inhibited Tuareg enthusiasm for the project. Local participation is a political process, and is subjected to the constraints of existing political issues.

GENERAL REFLECTIONS: PARTICIPATION AS VALUE

"Local participation" in development is a variant of a general democratic concern with government "by the people". Anthropologists would be quick to point out that the concept of participation is thus highly culture-bound. At least as the donors' rhetoric means the term, participation in development - sharing in the conceptualization, inception, and ongoing management of directed change - implies at least three major dimensions of cultural context, not necessarily givens in specific local situations.

WHO PARTICIPATES? The notion that development decisions should be widely shared reflects a western value on individuality. It is disrespectful of non-egalitarian social forms in which the cultural order places greater value on the opinions of some and not others. It assumes that everyone has an opinion, that opinions should be expressed and not suppressed, that people have a responsibility to make themselves heard, that change should proceed from the aggregated will of individuals. As Dorothy Lee (1959) noted many years ago, the mirror to "participation" is an obligation to develop one's "self", one's skills. Little of this well-elaborated cultural value obtains in many of the pastoral societies for which developers plan a "participatory" strategy. While pastoralists may be more forthright and self-sufficient than others, in the pastoral zone of Niger there are strong differences between WoDaaBe, who more closely conform to an egalitarian pastoral image, and the Tuareg, who are divided and hierarchicalized in terms of (former) class status, religious origin, and descent. But few people in either group are likely to develop them"selves" without reference to their communities and to the leaders of their kin groups.

Seen in this context, "participation" and cooperative action are overlapping forces. Collective rather than individual participation is the form that NRL designers and implementers chose as the locally-appropriate way to put the participatory strategy into action. Basing the idea of herders' associations on a model worked out in a small Oxfam-funded project among WoDaaBe near Abala, where Angelo Maliki

had provided animation (see Harmsworth 1983), the project organized ten pilot associations through 1982. The associations had access to revolving funds set up for a number of purposes including herd reconstitution, grain purchase at times of low prices, and a growing out program (see Swift, ed., 1983:703-753). As well, the associations were to supervise the work of the veterinary and human health first aid workers who were, in any event, members of the same herding groups. Within the groups (as is often true in West Africa) many members were given offices of honor, but not to recognize individual diversity (or vanity), or to specialize authority, as much as to emphasize the organic nature of the association and the importance of all the members to collective decisions. While some observers from outside the NRL in USAID expressed fears that this collective activity is anti-individualistic or downright "socialist" in style,, it is and will remain an appropriate vehicle for the achievement of participation in what are still non-individualistic societies.

WHAT INFORMATION IS PUBLIC? The "can-do" context of the participatory ideology assumes that problems are capable of resolution, if only they are worked on by "the people", and that the information necessary to problem-solving can itself be shared for decision-making. But knowledge is not all secular, and some kinds of action are reserved to people or to institutions (such as government) of special status or power. Among Djerma farmers in southern Niger, for example, what is happening on one's neighbor's fields is not for public knowledge even though it may be self-evident to passers-by. Bad luck, after all, may have human causes, and neighbors may cast an evil eye on one's affairs. For farmers to be seen to be too interested in a neighbor's field, even if it is in theory an agricultural demonstration plot, and - worse. - to discuss it openly, are unacceptable breaches of privacy. At a completely different level, action-oriented research on "social problems" implies that there are issues that public authority has not yet resolved. West African research institutes have not leapt to draw up research agendas for fear that they will be seen to be the political manifestos of the researchers involved. Among pastoralists, medical knowledge is private and semi-sacred, and is simply not to be put into the public domain for general education. A participation strategy must deal delicately with such limits to the public-ness of knowledge.

WHAT ARE DEVELOPMENT "NEEDS"? Northern Niger is not just another area of the country. The pastoralists are seen to be "different" and easily alienated from national loyalty. The history of colonial and post-colonial relationships between the Tuareg and the incorporating state lies beyond this paper. Tuareg (and to a lesser extent Fulani) have grievances with, but also interests in the state that make them special. The administrators of the pastoralists treat them gingerly, but sternly when it is deemed necessary. Broadcasts from Libya aimed at stirring Tuareg to disloyalty, a historic thread of Tuareg irredentism, Tuareg political refugees from Mali and occasional Tuareg defections from Niger (including a sensational one in 1981) provide a sensitive political agenda for the GON.

A major occasion for displaying this agenda takes place annually during the salt cure, usually in early September, when rain and the attraction of mineral-rich waters around In-Gall draw substantial concentrations of both Fulani and Tuareg pastoralists. For them the cure takes place over a month or more of movement, establishment of a central camp, of pasturing, and of celebrations and discussions. For the GON the "Cure Salée" is an official event, "opened" by them with a major ceremony at which all chiefs appear. The air is often tense, as the Minister of the Interior, arriving with a heavy entourage, exhorts loyalty from the citizens and reviews the services government is providing. The radio network, the Ministry of Health, and the Livestock service all provide intense services during the next few weeks, and then

traditionally the service convoys all retreat for another year.

What, in this context, is a development "need" or a "problem"? What is there to participate about? Why do we aggregate economic and social services into a "development project" and leave the political agenda to the GON and the pastoralists as a set of matters between them? And why should the pastoralists acknowledge and conform to our categories?

The questions about politics can be asked as well about Nigerien-Nigerian relationships that have strong impacts on pastoral movements and markets; or about food and who should supply it and at what prices, or about schooling, health services or production factors. I do not mean to suggest here that all the issues are fraught with tension, but simply that all are "problems" of one sort or another, and that projects cannot and should not move on every possible front. Local participation, however, has the effect of stimulating local address of all the issues, and it is the ones that cannot be addressed that may in a given instance be the more important or the more popular. We must not overestimate the applicability of a "local participation" strategy or be surprised that its implications can be frightening. Nor should we be surprised when we discover that issues we think are treatable are simply not perceived to be so by the people with whom we are dealing. We are probably the last to discover what can be talked about in the local arena.

CONCLUSION: THE PERILS OF PARTICIPATION

① Local participation has always been seen by aid officials as a tool for furthering western-style democracy in developing countries (Berg 1976). It is ironic that as culturally loaded as the concept is, anthropologists have also favored participatory strategies. For them participation has meant at least a first step toward devolving authority over key aspects of project planning and implementation to the presumed project beneficiaries.

② Involving local people in decision-making is easier said than done, as the Niger Range and Livestock Project demonstrates. "Needs" must be defined; ideas which match project capabilities must be sorted out; information must be gathered that is deemed secular and operable; barriers to communication must be anticipated; costs of dealing openly with all comers must be calculated; conflicting government and beneficiary interests must be mediated. There is no solving of all the problems that arise - participatory strategies may indeed raise new ones as they address others.

③ Is local participation, then, a viable ideological banner at all? As with other prescriptions such as that to involve "women in development" or to address development to the "poorest of the poor", there is simply no culture-free source of evidence for the universal validity of any such ideas. The values embodied in the slogans are just that, values and not social laws. Anthropologists in development settings must exercise their ethical choices as well as their scientific judgments. As sensitive to cultural variation and (mis-)interpretation as "local participation" is, then, anthropologists as well as other development specialists are likely to pursue one form of it or another in their project work.

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