

RURAL GOVERNANCE – A PRECONDITION FOR INCLUSIVE AND SUSTAINABLE RURAL TRANSFORMATION

Good rural governance is key to realising rights, leaving no-one behind and achieving sustainability of rural development programmes. Yet, it does not receive the attention it requires. In a world that is likely to miss the Sustainable Development Goals in twelve years from now, a discussion on rural governance is an urgent necessity, our authors maintain.

By Jes Weigelt and Alexander Müller



Transferring land-use rights to women in Tiarako, Burkina Faso.

Photo: Saydou Koudougou

The assassinations of land and environmental rights activists, a food insecure household who has not been seen by an agricultural extension agent for years, absent teachers in the municipal grammar school, or illegally issued logging permissions in a protected area are all expressions of rural governance going wrong, even deadly wrong. Lacking sustainability of rural development programmes, missing inclusion of the poorest, or programmes addressing the same households or wards ever and ever again, are similarly expressions of poor rural governance.

We need not elaborate on the additional changes to agricultural production systems brought about by climate change and the closing democratic space of civil society to emphasise the need to work towards good rural governance.

Yet, in our work, we must note that there are not enough systematic and strategic approaches to make responsible rural governance come about. This brief article is driven by this concern. It is not about achieving a definition of the specificities of rural governance, but sets out from the observation that it often represents a missing area of investment and that it is needed to achieve socially just and ecologically sustainable rural transformations.

We develop our line of reasoning against our involvement in agricultural development and natural resources management projects; we draw mainly on experiences from different countries in Africa. This is obviously an incomplete picture and we would be grateful if others could complement this contribution.

WHAT IS RURAL GOVERNANCE?

Governance refers to the whole range of regulations, no matter if they are executed by the government, the private sector or civil society. The term 'governance' denotes that regulation has moved beyond the realm of the state and is now also an effect of private actors, profit or not-for-profit oriented. Rural governance is a product of contemporary influences and the economic, social, and political history of a particular rural region. It is often a mix between locally driven governance processes and influences from regulatory decisions taken by administrative tiers higher up.

Good or responsible rural governance is driven by three principles. The first principle addresses realising human rights of citizens. These include civil and political, and social, cultural

as well as economic human rights. The right to adequate food, the right to housing, or the voluntary guidelines on the governance of land are examples of the human rights basis of rural development programmes. Second, empowerment of citizens is key, in particular of marginal and vulnerable groups. We use the term 'marginal groups' instead of 'excluded' to express that those people find themselves in this position because of the way they are included in society, not because they are alien to it. And third, accountability of elected politicians and public authorities to their citizens should be given.

KEY ISSUES IN RURAL GOVERNANCE

There are tremendous challenges when it comes to achieving responsible land governance for women (and widows in particular), to secure community managed lands vis-à-vis other claims on the land, or to secure access to land by the youth. In Kenya, for example, the land lease market is often not regulated, leaving both the lesser and the lessee very insecure when it comes to enforcing lease agreements. Many governments have drafted progressive land policies. Yet, there are implementation gaps.

Recognising and enforcing the legitimate tenure rights is a recurrent challenge in infrastructure projects or the demarcation of protected areas and the implementation of afforestation projects. Given the importance of secure rights to land for food security, inclusive economic growth, sustainable resource use, and adaptation to climate change, recognising and enforcing legitimate land rights is a key concern of rural governance. With the important role that customary institutions play in land rights allocations and their recurrent shortcomings in accountability, achieving responsible land governance requires blending customary and statutory institutions.

There is a service delivery gap between – often privatised – service providers and citizens and users of the service. Scarce financial resources often limit expansion of these services. The impact of structural adjustment programmes still leaves many rural areas unattended by agricultural extension services. Private services often remain out of reach for the poor and public services have a limited outreach. Closing the service delivery gap under these conditions requires top-down approaches to bring services closer to the people. Decentralisation policies are important in this regard. It also requires closing the service gap from below by supporting community-based organisations in

accessing these services. In effect, broadening service delivery under these conditions necessitates cost sharing between service providers and users.

Inclusive financial institutions are another key area of rural governance. This applies to both access to credit and insurance products. The latter will assume increasing importance in view of an increasing number of extreme weather events as an effect of climate change. A key challenge is finding ways to extend these services to those households and individuals who live below the poverty line and find commercial credits offered by non-governmental organisations still inaccessible.

There is growing demand for land and other natural resources. Urbanisation, protected areas and, increasingly, afforestation for carbon capture, and rising demand for export oriented agricultural production all make planning the use of natural resources more and more important. One key term in this regard is public interest. Plans are made to live up to public interest or public concern. Yet, who defines public interest? Whose voices count? Furthermore, planning processes often tend to be highly complex. In these cases, emphasis is often paid to generating the necessary data for planning without due recognition of the resources needed for later implementation. There is an urgent need to arrive at planning processes that are true to the principles of good rural governance, yet are conscious of the capacities to implement the respective plans afterwards.

A recursive relationship exists between rural governance and social innovations. Moving towards rural governance reforms often requires working under unfavourable conditions. Resources are scarce, capacities are limited, there are staff fluctuations, and political priorities keep changing. In instances such as these, innovative approaches are needed. In Burkina Faso, for example, the NGOs GRAF and TMG have jointly piloted a process to transfer land-use rights to women. This process complements the implementation of the Code Rural by the Government of Burkina (see also article in Rural 21 3/18 Gender equity, Stiem-Bathia and Koudougou). Locally-driven processes to find solutions to governance challenges are an important ingredient in governance reforms. They provide innovations that are adapted to capacities and needs of those whom they are required to serve. These social innovations hence create good rural governance. Vice versa, good rural governance supports identifying social innovations.



A bank in Burkina Faso offering micro loans for women to boost income generation.

Photo: Jörg Böthling

WHAT TO DO – AND WHERE TO START?

In view of the above, we argue to start investing strategically in rural governance reforms. We acknowledge that there is a range of development programmes by multilateral and bilateral donors alike that include empowerment of community-based organisations (CBOs) which support public sector service delivery reform, or address other elements of rural governance. At the same time, we perceive that rural governance reforms do not receive the necessary level of attention and that opportunities to address rural governance in existing projects are not systematically used.

FINANCING WINDOWS FOR COMMUNITY-BASED ORGANISATIONS

For accountability to work, for citizens to effectively claim their rights, or for making service delivery work from the bottom up, CBOs are key. Yet, they do find it notoriously difficult to obtain funding. Rural governance reform will therefore benefit from financing instruments tailored to the needs of CBOs. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) Small Grants Programme holds important lessons to learn in this regard. Donors can support not only by strengthening existing or contributing to new financing mechanisms for CBOs, but also by establishing technical units to reduce the transaction costs in handling grant applications.

Rural governance reforms tend to be messy – non-linear, power ridden, benefiting from windows of opportunity that could not be foreseen. International development partners aiming to support these reforms should there-

fore increasingly apply adaptive management in their operations, with adaptive management understood as programme management that embraces continuous learning and adapting to changing circumstances. Activities predefined at the outset of the project that cannot be altered during implementation would probably be the opposite of adaptive programming. Results-based financing, pressure on enhancing aid effectiveness and the resulting need to demonstrate progress quickly make up for a challenging environment to introduce adaptive management. Hence, a window of 20 per cent of the budget for rural development programmes earmarked for supporting governance reforms in a demand driven way seems an ambitious, politically feasible step to introduce adaptive management.

MEASURING PROGRESS THE QUALITATIVE WAY

Measuring progress in rural governance reforms needs to go beyond quantitative indicators. Governance reforms are about altering the relations between citizens and service providers and between the electorate and politicians. These changes in relations largely escape quantitative indicators. What does the increased attendance of village assemblies by women actually tell about changing gender relations in households? What does a higher percentage of marginalised groups of watershed user groups actually say about their influence on the processes within the group to decide on the allocation of productive assets? Qualitative assessments are key to obtain a deeper understanding of governance reforms.

Whether or not the Agenda 2030's principle of 'leaving no-one behind' will be achieved

will depend largely on the world's rural areas. Building on the previous point, the instruments put in place to report on progress in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) should empower marginal and vulnerable groups in holding their governments accountable. Truly inclusive and participatory monitoring – or, to use 2030 Agenda language, follow up and review – instruments can support rural governance reform processes.

DIGITISATION AND SOCIAL INNOVATIONS

Digitisation holds the potential to support these reform processes. The digital world offers new ways to connect, share and mobilise. Digitisation must be linked to social innovations to make it work for governance reforms, so that marginal and vulnerable groups benefit. With regard to service delivery, more traditional ways of organising are needed to turn this new way of connecting into practice for illiterates or those who do not yet have access to the necessary technology. Going that last mile is key. Again, it is CBOs which can fill this gap.

LET US START ADDRESSING RURAL GOVERNANCE HEAD-ON

As we move on towards 2020, there is increasing recognition that many countries are not on track to achieve the SDGs. Unfortunately, leaving no-one behind is often not more than a lip service. There needs to be good rural governance to sustain investments in health, education, or natural resources management in rural areas. Yet, good rural governance is a distant reality in many places. Leaving no-one behind will be an elusive quest, if this is not changed. There is a need to systematically consider governance in rural development programming and to start strategically investing in rural governance reforms. To make an argument that is closer to home, if they embrace the importance of rural governance, donors will be ahead of the curve in the discussions to come.

Jes Weigelt, Head of Programmes, and **Alexander Müller**, Managing Director, Thinktank for Sustainability (TMG), in Berlin, Germany.
Contact: jes.weigelt@tmg-thinktank.com

For references, see online version of this article at: www.rural21.com