

The development of irrigation and land tenure system evolution in Gaya (Niger)

Nicola Cantoreggi, Institut de géographie (IGUL)

Summary

Since the mid 90's, international actors as well as governmental actors have raised their interest into the development of irrigation's potential that is still largely unexploited in Niger. It seems all the more interesting as it could answer the needs of a fast growing population (3.3% per year). However, if everyone agrees on the need to development this system, the current implementation triggers questions on the process itself and its side effects. National and international policies on this matter were build upon an historical process through colonial, post-colonial and then the late 1980's neoliberal structures, leading to a business model that reveals a discrepancy between the state logic and the farming one. This business model asks for a high capacity of mobilization of resources unachievable for many, especially when they want to address small-scale irrigation (area <1-2ha).

This research aims at exploring the linkage between the small-scale irrigation and the evolution of land tenure systems. The empirical analysis raise three main questions that concern the issue of secure land rights through the modern law, the commoditization of land and land access for the producers.

The department of Gaya has a large potential of accessible water resources that allowed an extensive production of fruits and vegetables since the 1980's. These productions were developed at first by the local farmers, but the high value added engendered then attracted external players as well, such as civil servants and merchants. The World Bank supported this momentum through the development of a business type project. Unfortunately, it reached mostly the new external players and local elites rather than the small farmers, notably due to the high illiteracy rate among farmers. In terms of land tenure analysis, the project excluded all farmers cultivating land on a loan or lease agreement and all those for whom it was difficult to obtain a title of ownership.

However, this new interest for small-scale irrigation exerted by the project and the new players triggered the commoditization of land. As a matter of fact, the demographic constraints and the fragmentation of the familial land ownership led to a more individual production system, where the customary relation to land tenure is weakened or even overcome. This makes it easier for the new players who need to settle their small-scale irrigation projects to purchase land.

When there are only few areas available for selling, the purchasing processes are undermining the farmers with insecure rights. If the withdrawal of lands is supposed to be smoothed by social measures, such as replacement of the land and primary offers to purchase the land, those measures are often not attractive. The proposed land of replacement is frequently too far away located or lesser fertile to be of any use and the economic capacity of purchasing is too little, eventually leading the farmers to leave their *terroirs*.

Those in charge of the application of the Rural Code have succeeding in answering the need of written secured land tenure, but have difficulty to meet the challenge of doing the same to secure rights for farmers with loans or lease agreements. The small-scale irrigation could bring an answer for their financial needs to buy the land, but it would require mobilizing resources to invest or an easier access to supportive projects.

The economic benefice from small-scale irrigation is now widely recognized, but we have to take also into account the risks of marginalization of part of the small farmers. For a more widely spread exploitation of small-scale irrigation, the mechanism of land regulation as well as the process to access the financial and technical support of projects must be revised in order to reach more small farmers.