

An NGO Perspective on Food Security and the Environment: ACORD in the Sahel and Horn of Africa

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Introduction

The Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) is a broad-based international consortium of non-governmental agencies working together for long-term development in Africa.¹ Its mandate is to work in areas of Africa where local structures are weak or non-existent. As such, most of ACORD's programmes are concentrated in ecologically and economically marginal zones whose populations tend to suffer from chronic, sometimes deteriorating into acute, food insecurity. This article discusses three case studies which demonstrate the importance of looking at causes of poverty and food insecurity and the need to resolve some of the immediate needs that these produce, to create the space for the poor to address questions relating to environmental degradation. Whilst it is clear that the poor have a vested interest in preserving the environment on which they depend for survival, it seems that their poverty and insecurity can force them into action that they know to be counter-productive in the long term. Secondly, the case studies indicate the constraints that NGO activities face in relation to the wider influences upon them. This shows how the difficulty of running development programmes sensitively in the midst of an intricate web of local level social, economic and political relationships is compounded by the recursive link between these and macro-level factors. The third case study, from Benin, illustrates attempts to enable women to be more involved in conservation activities, emphasising the need to address the powerlessness of a vulnerable group to enhance control over decision-making about the resources which women use.

Although there is much discussion about the causes of, the rate of, and possible solutions to environmental degradation [Blaikie 1985], it is now generally agreed that even if it is a 'very visible symptom, the "problem" is much more complex than it appears at first glance. Once consequence of this is that the "solution" is not simply more or better land husbandry programmes' [Fones-Sundell 1989:5]. An

¹ ACORD is currently supporting 26 programmes in the following countries: Guinea, Mali, Burkina Faso, Benin, Chad, Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda, Rwanda, Tanzania, Angola and Mozambique.

analysis of the causes of the 'problem'² leads to factors relating to poverty, land tenure, macro-economics and the varying and conflicting political and economic interests of the farmer or herder, government and donor. Within communities, and indeed within households, there is differential access to, and control over resources, based on age, gender, class and ethnicity. These relations are determined by wider socio-economic and political factors that are in turn influenced by such relations [Giddens 1979]. It is therefore necessary that the articulation between micro- and macro-level processes is examined even if, for NGOs such as ACORD, it is only to ensure that any projects it supports do not fail because macro-level factors inhibit their development.

ACORD's programmes in Africa have generally taken as their starting point the belief that no activity can be sustainable if not undertaken with the full and real participation of the population in the design, execution and evaluation of that activity (although success in living up to this principle is extremely varied). Other experiences, particularly in the area of soil and water conservation, suggest the validity of this policy [Reij 1988]. Consequently, and particularly in the Sahel zone, ACORD normally aims, in the first instance, to help people resolve certain immediate and pressing needs, often related to securing food or animal production and/or access to food, so that the groups that are supported are able to take a longer-term perspective and thus advance their own ideas for dealing with the protection of their production systems. Activities which aim to address immediate needs differ according to the situation and in their environmental impact, but all attempt (with mixed results) to be economically and environmentally sustainable in the medium term.

This is not to suggest that the farmers and herders with whom ACORD works are neither aware of the problem nor adopting strategies to confront it. Indeed, it is unclear whether the agricultural and herding systems that they practise are as environmentally-unsound as some would have us believe. However, it seems that for the most vulnerable, it is often the case that immediate need can force

² Although it is often the case that natural processes of weathering and erosion are equated with man-made environmental degradation.

individuals into unsustainable livelihoods.

Although ACORD does not have its own definition of 'food security', it recognises that to be food secure means more than producing enough to eat. Entitlements to food, the seasonal and intra-seasonal variance of food insecurity, and the impact of macro-level factors all have to be taken into account.

The following examples will attempt to indicate the difficulties of actually implementing programmes that attempt to address such complex issues.

1 Support to Community and Cooperative Activity in the Gao and Timbuktu Regions of Mali

The major activities undertaken by ACORD to respond to immediate needs in the Gao and Timbuktu Regions of northern Mali involve small improvements in the existing system of flood irrigation, the regeneration of riverine fodder crops in the Niger river zone, and the renovation of existing water points and herd reconstruction in the pastoral zone. In both zones, support to community-managed seed and cereal banks has also been undertaken. In the river zone, the aim is to preserve the tried and tested symbiotic relationship between rice production, fodder crops and fishing and in the pastoral zone to spread pressure on rangeland, through the renovation of existing water points, as well as at a later stage introducing small dykes and bunds to replenish the water table and reduce run-off. Such 'technical' activities are accompanied by varied and diverse support to institution-building of various informal (village groups, women's groups) and formal non-governmental structures (cooperatives).

Once production of and access to food has been improved, local people have shown greater motivation to protect their investment through several erosion-control activities, including tree planting, dune fixation, regeneration of indigenous fodder crops and wild cereals. ACORD's role has been to support such initiatives resulting from the removal of the immediate causes of their poverty, which had hitherto been one of the principal factors encouraging them, in an economically rational way, to over-exploit their environment.

Whilst watching the impact the activities it supports might have on the environment, ACORD recognises the circular link between poverty/food insecurity and environmental degradation. The programme works particularly on the relief of poverty (and improvement of food security) and then additionally to support initiatives taken by the population themselves to protect their environment.

The principal problems [Oxby 1989] that have emerged from this experience relate to:

i **the conflicting demands for labour at crucial times of**

the year. Many of the proposed ways of confronting environmental degradation demand some labour input at harvest-time or during the dry season when family members are often pursuing coping strategies, such as wild cereal collection. There is, therefore, a danger of reducing the diversity of existing survival strategies.

- ii **the need for officially recognised attribution of rights to land, and the need to defend and enforce these rights.** Even where rights to improved resources have been allocated to communities and recognised by the local authorities, herder groups are often not able to exclude other users, who may or may not have had access previously.
- iii **the difficulty of making provision for community use and management of resources.** The allocation of rights to common resources to communities has presented problems. If no provisions are made for excluded users, enforcing attributed rights may be impossible and its desirability questionable.

2 Qala-en Nahal Refugee Settlement, Sudan

This programme differs from much of ACORD's experiences in that its main objective is to help mainly Eritrean refugees achieve a degree of food self-sufficiency, through the introduction of a tractor hire service scheme. When the programme started in 1981, it was perceived as a short to medium term intervention to reduce dependency on food aid, whilst awaiting the refugees' return home. A major environmental review of this programme by the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) in 1988 drew the following conclusions:

- i that it is very difficult to guarantee that any development occurring in Qala-en-Nahal will take place **without** environmental degradation;
- ii that little blame can be attached to the population for poor land husbandry as insufficient land had been allocated to them, outsiders have been permitted to exploit forest resources within the scheme, and external factors (over which the population have no control) have been the main cause of degradation;
- iii that the population are well aware of the causes and dangers of environmental degradation and for those aspects over which they have some influence, such as livestock numbers and grazing, they have developed mechanisms of community control;
- iv that the impact of the programme on most social and ethnic groups has clearly been beneficial, reaching many important priority groups including the poor, the displaced, women and other disadvantaged persons;
- v that experimental work on environmental restoration, e.g. catchment planting, micro catchments and adaptive agricultural research, appears

to be the only long-term method of ensuring higher productivity on a sustainable low-input basis.

The lessons to be learnt from this experience indicate that although ACORD is 'doing the only sensible thing possible in the circumstances' [NRC 1988], in concentrating on increasing the productivity of the only resource available (the land), and has by increasing food self-sufficiency been able to lead on to environmental protection, this is not sufficient. This is because the scheme 'can often be no more than silent witness to the major events which are taking place in the central plains of the Sudan'. Such events include major climatic fluctuations, long-range population migration, changing agricultural practices in surrounding areas and the increased urban demand for fuelwood and charcoal.

3 Integrated Rural Development Programme in Materi District, Benin

ACORD's strategy in Benin is based on the recognition that women are the key actors in resource utilisation in the area. The programme has attempted to reduce constraints on women's labour, increase food self-sufficiency, improve water supply and encourage women's collective action. In 1987, a natural resources component was added to the programme, based on awareness-raising using locally developed animation materials and undertaking small pilot activities in villages where ACORD was already supporting other activities. Through dialogue with groups, a controlled early burning campaign, reservoir protection and certain agro-forestry activities have been undertaken.

A reduction in women's labour through improved water provision, grinding mills and utilisation of donkey carts for transport has enabled them to have more time available to discuss problems related to environmental protection, as a group, and to undertake certain pilot activities (tree-planting, improved stoves etc). In addition, a cereal bank component has improved the groups' control over their own production and therefore has had a positive impact on food security. However, the activities adopted to increase agricultural productivity, mainly through improved agricultural techniques and animal traction, have tended to increase the area under cultivation rather than productivity, and have therefore lessened the area under fallow. This expansion of cultivated area has not been accompanied by parallel environmental protection techniques.

This apparent contradiction between the different activities of the same programme has not yet been resolved. The long term nature of the programme, which started in 1983, has allowed compensatory measures to be introduced (this has recently included composting) as the programme developed, which are

continually adapted and built upon in a permanent action-research mode. As Reij [1988] has noted, the elaboration of location-specific soil and water conservation techniques in partnership with farmers is a long-drawn-out process because such techniques are likely to fail unless they: produce yield increases (preferably in the first year); permit an expansion of cultivated area through the reclamation of degraded fields; improve yield security, i.e. let a yield be obtained in years of low rainfall; and have low maintenance requirements.

Conclusion

ACORD's experiences suggest that supporting food security does not necessarily conflict with environmental sustainability. Indeed, it is usually a prerequisite for tackling some of the environmental problems confronting people in the kinds of areas in which ACORD works. It is also clear that many of the factors contributing to land degradation remain outside the immediate control of the population and of ACORD.

Within the micro-environment of the programmes ACORD supports, more needs to be known about:

- i poverty mechanisms and the differential access to, and control over, resources both between and within households;
- ii existing coping strategies and reciprocal relations within and between communities;
- iii who undertakes measures to improve the environment and why;
- iv who is involved in activities that are detrimental to the environment and why.

This would enable greater clarity about the preconditions for encouraging sustainable development, as well as revealing interest groups and what conflicts or complementarities exist between them.

Within the macro-environment ACORD needs to:

- i analyse what factors are precluding the development of micro-level changes and how they might be addressed;
- ii analyse what mechanisms exist for NGOs to influence the political decision-making that impinges on these factors.

This requires a greater collaboration between academics and NGOs and a greater understanding of the constraints placed upon both communities in developing such relationships. It means using existing knowledge to understand better what is happening in any particular area, instead of prescribing what should be done on the basis of extrapolated, non-comparable experiences. This requires a decentralised approach to research involving those most affected by environmental degradation in defining the problem and

elaborating potential solutions, as well as strengthening the capacity of local structures to analyse macro-level factors so that they are capable of entering into policy dialogue with decision makers. The changing nature of the state in many of the areas in which ACORD works means it can rely less than in the past on adequate channels to express need from the grassroots upwards. Government extension workers or animators, where they still exist, are often obliged to resort to what Chambers [1988] has called 'moonlighting and daylighting' and/or rent extraction. This underlines the importance of facilitating the emergence of strong producer groups and encouraging, but not artificially creating, alliances and federations between them.

Blaikie [1985] suggests that soil erosion does not become a social issue until deterioration is recognised and some sort of action taken, and that it does not become a political-economic issue until the action that is taken brings about a conflict of interest, which may be either to do with the soil erosion itself or with wider questions relating to land ownership and the appropriation of surpluses. ACORD's experience indicates that there may be situations in which deterioration is a problem and is recognised to be so, but other constraints, relating to food security and powerlessness, preclude those most affected from taking action.

If 'it is not clear how poorer farmers . . . will generate strong market signals to institutions of research and development . . . since such institutions tend to ignore the needs of poor and/or small farmers and environmentally fragile areas because the economic returns to research and development tend often to be small' [Blaikie 1985:3], then those organisations less concerned by rates of return on investment should be providing alternative signals. In an indirect fashion, ACORD has attempted to do this, for example, by

supporting groups in Mali which have shown signs of 'evolving into real economic pressure groups, able in the longer run to challenge existing bases of economic and political power' [Swift 1988]. However, it is clear that there are limits to the ability of NGOs to influence governmental, bi-lateral and multi-lateral institutions directly. It is here that academic institutions and research bodies also have an important role to play.

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