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Improving decentralised natural resource management in the Sahel
The case of the Sourou river plain in Mali

Over the course of 2019, and despite being located in a region marked by violent conflict, the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* achieved a unique feat in the West African region.[1] It developed an Integrated and Sustainable Development Programme (ISDP) that defined concrete actions to implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the Sourou river plain in Mali in an adaptive fashion and set itself up as the main coordinator for the implementation of this plan. Both achievements will help the region coordinate natural resource management – thereby addressing one of the region's root causes of conflict. This policy brief outlines how the effective devolution of power was achieved through an inclusive rather than a 'rubber stamp' approach to the planning process and by having a donor that made the improvement of local governance a result of its own intrinsic value. For the long-term implementation of the ISDP, care should be taken to ensure the continued inclusivity and representativeness of local development and resource management while remaining mindful of the interaction of this new governance structure with existing governance and power structures.
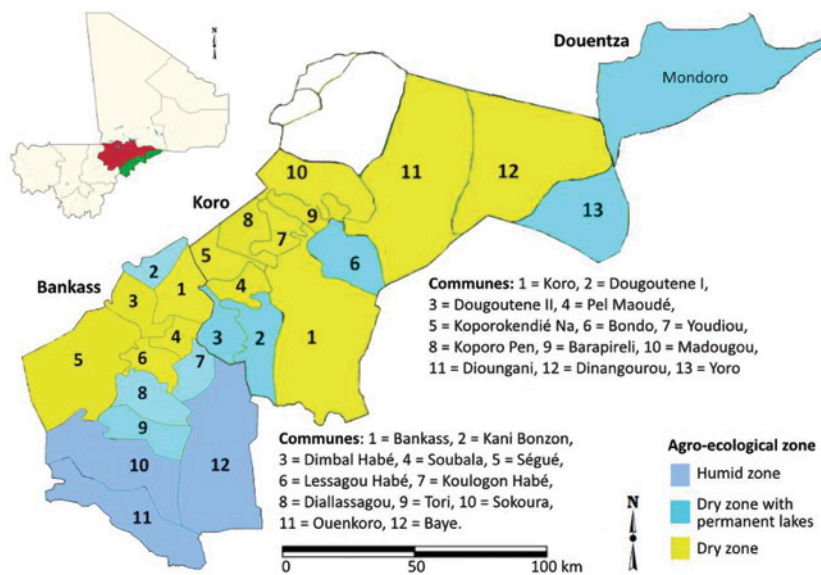
Introduction

The lack of effective natural resource management has become a key conflict driver in the Sahel – particularly in the face of increased pressure on land and water, and the aggravating factor of climate change. On the Sourou river plain in Mali that borders Burkina Faso, challenging natural resource management has been further compounded historically by the mismatch between the region's geographical and administrative boundaries – resulting in the absence of a governance body with the structural authority to coordinate the region's resource management and development.

This situation changed in 2018, when administrations in the region formed the *Inter collectivité du Sourou,* which was adopted by

decree of the governor of Mopti.[2] This body, whose administrative boundaries match the region's natural boundaries, developed

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1 Nooteboom, S. and N. van Duivenbooden. 2019. 'Case Study: Duurzame ontwikkeling en waterbeheer in het Sourougebied in Mali', *Water Governance* 2019 (3), 93-98.

2 The *Inter collectivité* is an administrative body that allows municipalities to collaborate. The municipalities select a government from their midst. They also select an executive committee to represent the *Inter collectivité.* See: la Loi No 2017-051 du 02 octobre 2017 portant Code des Collectivités Territoriales; la Loi No 2017-052 du 02 octobre 2017 déterminant les conditions de la libre administration des Collectivités Territoriales; le Décret No. 2015-0848/P-RM du 22 décembre 2015 déterminant les modalités de la coopération entre les collectivités territoriales.

a plan for the long-term development of the region that concretized the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and defined concrete actions to implement these plans.[3] The *Inter collectivité* thereby positioned itself as an essential development partner recognised by communities in the region, the authorities of the Mopti region, the Malian government and the international community, and now aims to synergise all development efforts in the region. With sustained support, it is likely to remain a key driver of local development and a partner for national and international environmental development of the Sourou river plain.

This policy brief, which is based on documentation produced throughout the development of the Integrated and Sustainable Development Programme (ISDP)[4] and on interviews with key stakeholders, describes some of the main dilemmas that marked the process. The lessons learned from the creation and development of the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* can inform other attempts at decentralising sustainable

natural resource management in the Sahel (and other fragile settings) – thereby addressing one of the region's root causes of conflict.

How the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* came into being

The Sourou Valley is a wetland located on the border between Mali's Mopti region and Burkina Faso's Boucle du Mouhoun region – at the extreme north of the Volta Basin. A 2010 study by the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) highlighted the economic value of the wetland's natural resources.[5] In Burkina Faso, the government established the Sourou Valley Development Authority (AMVS) to promote the development of irrigated agriculture and increase agricultural production. In Mali, however, governance of the Sourou river plain has been inhibited by the lack of any government structure that could manage the plain across 29 territorial entities. This fragmentation stood in the way of the region's strategic development. It also meant there was not any organisation in the region with the ability or interest in negotiating with either the Malian government or the

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3 CARE Mali facilitated this process administratively and logistically – with funding from the Netherlands Embassy in Bamako. The Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) participated in an advisory role.

4 See http://souroumali.org for relevant documentation.

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5   https://www.iucn.org/node/6884

Burkinabe, who at any point in time could decide to use most of the available water through destocking Lake Sourou in Mali via the Lery dam. This uncertainty currently impedes structural investments in irrigation on the Malian side.

In 2018, the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* was created on the Malian side of the border to address these issues.[6] This *Inter collectivité* encompasses three different districts (Bankass, Douentza and Koro) and 26 municipalities. Its first mission was to develop an Integrated and Sustainable Development Programme (ISDP) for the Sourou river plain. This programme covers all the interests and sectors of the region and has developed a ten-year plan for the sustainable development of the region. At the suggestion of the Netherlands Embassy, the *Inter collectivité* and the Ministry in charge of environment and sustainable development decided to conduct a Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) – in line with the Kyiv Protocol of the UN[7] – to support the development of this ISDP. Towards this end, the Ministry of the Environment decided to establish an Inter-ministerial Commission bringing together the relevant ministries (Water, Agriculture, Fisheries, Infrastructure, Decentralization, the Environment, etc) to regularly inform the Ministry about the SEA's progress, notably its conformity with Malian laws.

As a first innovative aspect of the procedure, following the Kyiv Protocol's best SEA practices that provide for extensive public participation in government decision-making processes, the proposed plan was subsequently presented in all the municipalities it would affect.[8] A second

innovative aspect of the Sourou river plain case is that the same institution – the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* – developed the ISDP and the SEA in parallel. This allowed the *Inter collectivité* to use the SEA consultations to feed into the ISDP. Towards this end, the *Inter collectivité* organised two rounds of discussions in all relevant communities to conduct a needs assessment and to gather feedback that – sometimes after fierce discussion within the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* itself[9] – could be incorporated into the ISDP. This added to the plan's inclusive nature.[10] Another beneficial outcome of this joint development process was that the SEA gave the state an advisory role for decentralised planning decisions. State approval of the SEA effectively has enabled a more inclusive vision of decentralised territorial development planning, which is an empowering governance innovation. Power over local matters in the Sourou river plain, such as solar development, have thereby been effectively decentralised to the *Inter collectivité*.[11]

Given that the ISDP will be implemented in a region subject to climate change, the *Inter collectivité* has identified all the

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6   La Décision No 2018 00838/GRM-CAB-2 du Gouverneur de Mopti
7   The Kyiv SEA Protocol ensures that individual Parties integrate environmental assessment into their plans and programmes at the earliest stages – so helping to lay the groundwork for sustainable development. The Protocol entered into force on 11 July 2010. http://www.unece.org/env/eia/sea_protocol.html
8   Since December 2018, Malian law requires the conduct of a Strategic Environmental Assessment

(SEA) for the adoption of any development plan or strategy. Le Décret No 2018-0992/P-RM du 31 décembre 2018 fixant les règles et modalités relatives a l'évaluation environnementale stratégique. Although it is less clear on the need to organise public consultations (as complicated consultations are regarded as expensive), it did not directly contradict the Kyiv approach. The *Inter collectivité du Sourou* and the Inter-Ministerial Commission therefore decided to maintain the approach they had already decided on.
9   Main points of contention were the result of the incompatibility of activities that require flooded versus dry land and the fact that every community would like to see roads developed as soon as possible (and prioritisation was required).
10   The discussions included young people, women and the elderly as well as representative of all the different professions and sectors active at communal level.
11   A third beneficial outcome is that the SEA pushed those developing the ISDP to also address issues of climate change, which in the future would allow the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* to apply for funding to address the effects of climate change.

factors that could potentially result in the need for adaption of the action plan, and has already formulated alternative courses of action. The implementation of the ISDP will be coordinated by the *Inter collectivité* Bureau. The Bureau, assisted by a technical department, will take responsibility for project management of the plan, although it will initially delegate that role.[12] It will also support lobbying efforts and the development of projects by conducting supplementary studies.[13] The Bureau must approve any development project in the area, making the *Inter collectivité* a platform for continuous coordination serving the interest of all population groups in the area across local administrative boundaries. From this point onwards, the ISDP will remain an 'umbrella' programme that synergises all the interventions in the Sourou basin. The Netherlands Embassy has currently confirmed a crucial five-year line of funding to support the Bureau's implementation of the ISDP in its strategic lines of action in the sectors of water, food security and climate change with a cross-cutting focus on gender.

Dilemma 1 – Aligning local, national and international stakeholders

A key element to take into account when implementing the devolution of power is the alignment of local, national and international stakeholders. Without national commitment, there is a risk that the devolution of power will never materialise beyond paper. Alignment with the international donor agenda is similarly needed to ensure that local priorities match donor interests and priorities. In the case of the Sourou river plain, the *Inter collectivité* managed this by taking an inclusive rather than a 'rubber stamp' approach to the planning process and by integrating an assessment on sustainable development into their focus on social and environmental issues.

Indeed, one aspect that contributed to the success of the *Inter collectivité du Sourou*'s development of the ISDP is that it used the SEA as an instrument for inclusive development, for the effective devolution of powers from national to local level and for the cooperation of municipalities. This is novel, as the SEA culture in Mali – and in many other places in the world – is often one of producing reports with lots of endorsements that end up unread on a policy maker's desk. Yet the *Inter collectivité* used the process to bring members of the Inter-ministerial Committee (which would ultimately need to approve the SEA) to the region to showcase its needs and hear the Committee's views. Developing the ISDP and the SEA in a joint and inclusive fashion also meant the SEA was used not as a technical instrument but as a way to develop ownership by a representative body (the *Inter collectivité*) and sponsor administrative renewal. The *Inter collectivité* now has the power to approve or disapprove all investments in its territory.[14] The ISDP has also been integrated into the local zoning/ development plans of all the municipalities that constitute the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* – thereby further formalising the plan.

When looking at the lessons learned for other regions and settings, it should first be noted that the Sourou river plain was generally of little importance in national development policies, which did not take account of the region's major political or economic attractions. In a positive sense, this meant the region was a good candidate for the empowerment of decentralised governance. In a more negative sense, it is quite common for public planning processes to lose their transparency, even if formally required by an SEA, when political interests come in.[15] This suggests that the lessons learned from the Sourou river basin may best be first applied in similar 'safe areas' to get the momentum going for institutional renewal.

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12 There is a supporting organisation for the direct execution of development projects.
13 Its predecessor, the Committee Restreint (Task Force), was dissolved after the adoption of the ISDP. La Décision No: 00 349/GRM-CAB-2 du Gouverneur de Mopti.

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14 It can do so by means of a Declaration of No Objection.
15 The law itself provides a basis for this as it allows the minister to make exemptions when requiring an SEA.

Another thing to keep an eye on is the fact that the creation of an additional administrative layer creates a situation of competing mandates. In the best-case scenario, this results in confusion as to who has ultimate decision-making power over development projects: the *Inter collectivité du Sourou*, the municipality or a competent ministry? The Malian Ministry of the Environment, for example, would be the key contact point for donors wanting to fund climate change-related projects. But under the new governance arrangement instituted in the *Inter collectivité*, its Bureau must approve any development project in the region. In the worst-case scenario, as witnessed in Mali on a regular basis,[16] the situation of competing mandates could be exploited to the advantage of big political/ economic players that benefit from their ability to pick and choose among the administrative avenues available to them. To address this concern, the power and mandate of *Inter collectivités* such as the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* will need to be legally defined.

A second clear example of best practice identified in the process of conducting the SEA is that the *Inter collectivité* decided to integrate an assessment on sustainable development into their focus on social and environmental issues – taking into account Mali's national sustainable development policies as well.[17] This means that an assessment was made of which options for development were economically efficient as well as desirable from environmental and social points of view. By daring to venture outside of the narrow mandate that normally applies to SEAs, the *Inter collectivité* managed to create an ISDP that addresses both international climate and SDG agendas. The ISDP thereby offers a framework for action that donors can support directly,

as a high-quality SEA has already been conducted and the SDGs have been operationalised. As a consequence, several donors have already indicated that they can work directly with the *Inter collectivité* to implement some of its development plans.[18]

Dilemma 2 – Supporting process versus outcomes

Projects that support local governance are generally not implemented in a neutral fashion. It is common practice for donors and implementing agents to roll out a programme with a predefined set of fixed outcomes. These programme outcomes can usually be easily quantified, monitored and evaluated, and typically align with the donor's and/ or implementing organisation's strategic priorities. This way of programming is often criticised for lacking the flexibility to adjust to local contexts and needs, and for preventing true local ownership of governance.[19]

In the case of the *Inter collectivité du Sourou*, key stakeholders agree that the financial and logistical support offered by CARE Mali and the Netherlands Embassy was crucial, precisely because it was offered in a neutral fashion. The *Inter collectivité* was allowed to develop its own ISDP in a bottom-up fashion without the donor or international partner putting specified goals or expected development outcomes on the table beforehand in a paternalistic fashion. As confirmed by the academic literature on decentralisation and local governance support,[20] this is best practice that allows

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16 Marquette, C. 2020. Maintaining peace and stability in Mali's Sikasso Region: Strategies to contain land-related conflicts. International Alert. Ursu, A. 2018. Under the gun: Resource conflicts and embattled traditional authorities in central Mali. CRU report. The Hague: Clingendael Institute.

17 Most notably the *Cadre stratégique pour la relance économique et le développement durable* (CREDD).

18 Other donors require consent by relevant ministries. Currently, therefore, the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* is searching for a focal point among these ministries.

19 Bisson, L. 2020. "*Decentralisation and inclusive governance : Lessons for the Sahel.*" CRU policy brief. The Hague: Clingendael Institute.

20 Gaster, L. 1996. 'Quality services in local government: a bottom up approach', *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 15 No. 2, pp. 80-96. Ouedraogo, H.M.G. 2003. 'Decentralization and local governance: experiences from Francophone Africa', *Public Administration and Development*, 23, 101-102; and Cheema, G.S. and Rondinelli, D.A. 2007. *Decentralizing Governance: Emerging concepts and practices*. Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press.

for true local ownership, and in this case resulted in the direct empowerment of the new governance institution.

Rather than focusing on specific development outcomes, the donors' main focus was to support the *Inter collectivité* in the process of developing the ISDP and conducting the SEA – thereby making the improvement of local governance a result of its own intrinsic value.[21] This was a time-intensive and costly process, as the organisation of meetings and interactions with the population and with outside actors took place in an oral culture where the internet is barely used. Yet it is exactly the financial support for the continued organisation of these meetings that proved crucial in creating the intercommunal exchange and trust needed to support the emergence of local joined-up governance.

The creation of the *Inter collectivité* and the development of the ISDP/SEA also benefited from the availability of experts. In addition to logistics, the donor funded a full-time Malian consultant and a half-time international consultant for one year. These consultants provided capacity building in terms of the planning, assessment and management processes – in line with international best practice – and supported the *Inter collectivité* in developing the capacity to connect population groups with

contrasting interests.[22] The *Inter collectivité du Sourou*'s development also benefited from the availability of Malian experts who were assigned to it by the decentralised ministerial services in Mopti through the governor.[23] A significant amount of data and information was available from these services – often produced by Malian experts for previous donor projects. Gaps in the data could be identified and filling these gaps became part of the action plan.

Over the next few years, the *Inter collectivité* will focus on implementation of the development goals identified in the ISDP. In continuation of its process-focused approach, the Netherlands Embassy has made funding available for a five-year period. This is a lengthy commitment that stands in stark contrast to the usual practice in the world of good governance support.[24] Its long-term vision and funding has made the *Inter collectivité*'s Bureau a credible organisation for the Malian government to consult and involve in decision making. It also helps keep effective local administrators on board who could easily earn more money in other ways, such as working for a non-governmental organisation (NGO). At the same time, it should be recognised that a balance needs to be struck here, as too much financial

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21 Possible indicators of the improvement of local governance: to make transparent decisions about desirable futures, to publicly justify these decisions with available knowledge from all parts of the population and from experts, accounting for uncertainties like future climate change, to postpone detailed decisions and studies to the implementation phase, to verify wide support for these decisions, to verify support among sponsors needed (e.g. by linking strategic choices to the SDGs), and to take the dispositions needed for a credible implementation (i.e. arrangements for project assessment and decision making, continuous communication, progress reporting, plan amendment).

22 All stakeholders agree that having the Netherlands Commission for Environmental Assessment (NCEA) participate in an advisory role was key because it was regarded as a neutral actor. If implementers had taken on this role, they might have brought along an interest in defining specific kinds of projects – thereby creating the perception that they would seek to influence the governing body in selecting them as partners for implementation.

23 These experts constituted the *Equipe de Planification et Evaluation Régionale* (Regional Planning and Evaluation Team – EPER).

24 As shown by Jan Erk, decentralisation programming efforts are often top-down and extremely fast-paced one-size-fits-all projects that do not allow for adequate consideration of local communities. Erk, Jan 2014. 'Federalism and decentralization in sub-Saharan Africa: five patterns of evolution', *Regional & Federal Studies*, 24:5, 535–552.

support may take away incentives to create a self-sufficient governance system.[25]

One way forward might be to ensure that different donors fund different parts of the *Inter collectivité*'s work – with separate dedicated streams of funding for governance support (minor share) and for support of the implementation of ISDP projects (major share). This would ensure that support for the overall management of the *Inter collectivité* is not tied to the implementation of donor-specific niche projects. There are two practical concerns, however. It could be difficult to find a donor willing to fund the governance share alone, as this would be hard to capture in a results framework. In addition, many donors find larger projects more appealing from an administrative point of view. This stands in the way of the flexible precision work and adaptability needed to truly respond to local needs and realities. The creation of small grants facilities could serve to address this latter issue.[26]

One final lesson from the process-based approach applied in the Sourou river plain is that the project was implemented in a context where the risk of armed (extremist) violence is never far away. Stakeholders feel they have laid a foundation for preventing the further escalation of conflict by improving natural resource governance in the region – and that this has brought back some hope to the area. The foundation is there for other donors to invest in and contribute to sustainable economic development in the region in the hope that this could prevent the spread of conflict and violent extremism. Yet this would require donors to accept that while there is hope, failure is also a possibility. Risk assessments must remain a constant procedure in every case.

Dilemma 3 – Conflict sensitivity and inclusiveness

The devolution of power is an inherently political process that affects, and has the potential to consolidate or change, local spheres of authority. It also risks consolidating existing social cleavages by benefiting some ethnic, familial or professional groups over others.[27] This danger is particularly pertinent in the Mopti region, where violent inter- and intra-communal conflicts over access to resources abound. Care should be taken to set up a conflict-sensitive and inclusive process that would abate rather than aggravate local tensions.

The *Inter collectivité du Sourou* managed these tensions by following the Kyiv Protocol's best SEA practices, meaning that it ensured extensive public participation in government decision-making processes by presenting the proposed plan in all the municipalities affected. Local consultations included representatives of all ethnic, professional, gender and age groups. By asking the population what they needed in a specific way (short term) as well as in a more general way (long term), all of the SDGs were addressed, and actions could be defined which were 1) visible in the short term (as well as for the benefit of all ethnic groups and all villages), and 2) aimed at the economic system innovations needed to improve the carrying capacity of the Sourou river plain's natural resources in the long term.

Most NGOs previously active in the Sourou were not in the habit of inviting representatives of the local governance system to lead their projects (in fact, they often imposed their ideas upon the official governance system), so this means a profound change in the mode of governance. As soon as the operational phase begins, the social cohesion created by this process will be tested, as it will be difficult to achieve direct benefits for everyone right from the

25 USAID. 2010. *Comparative Assessment of Decentralization in Africa: Final report and summary of findings.*

26 The Netherlands' support for the first phase addresses this concern with a governance support component and a project investment fund.

27 Schmauder, A. 2020. "*Hybrid governance dynamics in decentralization in Mali.*" CRU policy brief. The Hague: Clingendael Institute.

start. The president of the *Inter collectivité* indicated that they propose to start with financing rapid impact activities, such as communal gardens in all villages at the same time, which would benefit all ethnic groups; they hope this can be done without first undertaking lengthy studies.[28] Such a strategy should ensure that no one is left behind – a crucial element in an area at risk of armed (extremist) violence.

Key to watch out for in the future is whether everyone has indeed been – and continues to be – represented within the *Inter collectivité* and how the status quo's attempts to protect their interests can be squared with the principle of inclusive development. One key example here are the traditional authorities, such as those that manage land or fisheries. These actors have been included in discussions on the ISDP – together with the representatives of other relevant groups in society – so their points of view have been included in the development of the ISDP. Nevertheless, once projects are implemented which affect the management of land, transhumance, fishing or forest areas, some of the advantages that these actors currently have will be removed – meaning it will be crucial to negotiate with them and to take the local sociology of land and resource management into account.

To ensure gender inclusiveness, the donor pressed for the inclusion of women in the *Inter collectivité*. In practice, however, the question arises to what extent elected women are able to have their voices heard in a local political arena where women are structurally under-represented. The consultants involved noted that – at the very least – such attempts to improve the representation of women should be coupled with skills training for the women as well as workshops and meetings that create spaces for women's voices to be heard. Quotas are but a first step towards improving gender inclusiveness.

Another final concern with regard to inclusiveness is the question to what extent internal migrants and internally displaced persons (IDPs) are represented by the *Inter collectivité*. One example is fishermen who have moved to the Sourou river plain due to fish scarcity in the Niger delta. Another example is IDPs who have moved to the region due to the ongoing conflict in Central Mali, or migrants who have moved from northern regions (Timbuctu) following long periods of severe drought. These groups put additional pressure on natural resources and ways should therefore be found to ensure their views are represented in discussions on natural resource use and sustainable development.

Conclusion

The case of the Sourou river plain is an excellent example of the use of a technical governance instrument, the SEA, to instigate a process of bottom-up governance and administrative reform. It also showcases the importance of process considerations when designing local governance interventions. Logistical and financial support for the *Inter collectivité du Sourou* was not focused on reaching predetermined outcomes. Rather, the donor supported this local governance body in its process of developing a locally owned ISDP and conducting the SEA needed to align this programme with social, environmental and sustainable development goals and principles. The donor thereby managed to move the process along by circumventing the all-too-common trap of the donor's agenda and administrative requirements and processes shaping the direction of a development intervention. A summary of best practice lessons learned from the process of developing the ISDP are as follows:

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28   Oral communication January 2020.

Aligning local, national and international stakeholders

- Start local governance interventions that use technical tools such as the SEA in regions with low political interest, then build up making use of wins along the way to garner momentum.
- Ensure that local governance efforts do not contribute to the further duplication of mandates and administrative layers, which can be exploited by political and economic interests. Prevent the misuse of competing mandates, for example, by pressing for/supporting further regulation of the power and mandate of *Inter collectivités*.
- Rather than sticking to the letter on how to use technical instruments, such as the SEA, make strategic use of them such as by connecting environmental and social assessments to SDGs – thereby ensuring that local initiatives and proposals match the criteria and programming priorities of international funders.[29]

Procedural

- Support governance process as a result ini its own intrinsic value rather than putting certain goals or expected development outcomes on the table.
- Provide technical expertise to, and long-term funding of, bottom-up initiatives to support a long-term vision on development.
- Allow for flexible funding and accept that failure is a possibility in fragile regions at risk of armed (extremist) violence.

Inclusivity

- Ensure representation of all minority ethnic groups in the design of development interventions and ensure that the implementation of interventions remains inclusive – such as by starting with communal projects.
- Think about the best way to ensure the representation of women. If there is no local culture of female representatives, forcing quotas on governance mechanisms might not be enough.
- Ensure that minorities with no local representatives, such as migrants and IDPs, are also represented – particularly given their impact on natural resource use.

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29 Rather than the donor agenda setting the priorities for local development intervention in a top-down fashion, local governance bodies are thereby empowered to present their project proposals in a way that ties local needs and priorities to international agendas.

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