

Participatory rapid co-design for transformative resource governance research in the Gulf of Guinea

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Weak governance institutions are one of the leading causes of resource challenge in the Gulf of Guinea. The literature has overwhelmingly focused on incremental adjustments in institutions and resource management practices as possible solutions. This article calls for a transformative approach. It uses data from case studies from four Gulf of Guinea countries to present a framework for creating transformative change through resource governance. The particular focus of this article is the co-design phase. It discusses a participatory and rapid co-design approach which was used to explore pathways for achieving transformative resource governance. One of its conclusions is that transformative resource governance is a process, rather than an end, and emerges from productive engagement between governments and local communities.

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Introduction

The Gulf of Guinea (GG) is rich in resources of global interest such as water resources, biodiversity of rainforest and marine resources, ore, forest, fish, oil and gas, diamond and gold [1].¹ The geographic scope of this GG covers 6000 km of coastline from Senegal to Angola [2]. In terms of population and size, GG has about 300 million people [3]. Individually, GG countries have ‘diverse natural resource endowments and have similar characteristics of natural resource induced conflicts, mismanagement of public funds, corruption, bad governance and high incidence of poverty among citizens’ [4]. GG has some of the worst countries in terms of human development indicators and grossly deficient on most governance indexes such as open and transparent government, respect for the rule of law, free press and the conduct of regular and crisis-free elections [2]. It is a region where economic poverty and resource wealth exist side by side [5].

Communities where the resources are located are primary victims of environmental degradation and violent conflicts emanating from the exploitation of these resources. These communities experience increasing instability and an expanding gap between *haves* and *have nots* [1,4]. That is why GG has been described as a region in dire need of social transformation [6]. The region is suffering from the ‘paradox of plenty’ [5,7] or ‘resource curse’ [8]. The paradox of plenty or resource curse means that economies that are dependent on natural resources suffer from slower economic growth and development [6,7,8*,9]. Weak governance institutions have been identified as one of the major causes of the ‘resource curse’ in GG [10]. The major suggestions that have been made for improving the situation include using natural resources as collateral for foreign investments by GG countries [3], dumping natural resources dependency entirely [4], sociological remodeling [11], and capacity building and concerted leadership to building transparency and accountability [12]. All of these

¹ GG is used here in its widest definition to include countries within the coastal area between The Gambia and Namibia (–15°0′0″, –15°0′0″) in West Africa — which includes Senegal, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Sierra Leon, Liberia, Côte d’Ivoire, Ghana, Togo, Benin, Nigeria, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, São Tomé and Príncipe, Gabon, Congo, Democratic Republic of Congo and Angola.

suggestions hinge on providing incremental adjustments in institutions, governance and behaviours towards natural resource management [13,14]. They particularly entail macroeconomic, corporate social responsibility and the transparency approaches towards tackling the resource challenges in the GG [15]. Despite all these suggestions, no GG-specific framework has been developed for tackling the challenge. The closest effort at such a framework is based on a Nigerian study [16], which lacked generalisability because it lacked shared experience across case studies within GG. This article posits that addressing this situation in GG requires shared experiences from case studies from more than one GG country. It argues that incremental adjustments in institutions, governance and behaviours towards resource management are not enough in tackle the resource governance challenges in GG. It calls for a *transformative resource governance*. Transformative resource governance denotes a process of altering governance status quos towards achieving radical changes in resources management leading to socioeconomic and environmental benefits of local people.

Researching resource governance in four GG countries

The availability, access and allocation of natural resources present opportunities for social transformation for people who live in GG. We investigated four resource-rich communities in four GG countries, namely Angola and Nigeria (oil), and Côte d'Ivoire and Democratic Republic of Congo (ore). The goal was to articulate means of transformative resource governance in selected communities in these countries, and then share and compare experiences to generate knowledge for wider policymaking.

The objectives and research questions (see [Box 1](#)) hinged on examining stakeholders' perceptions of social equality, situation of land use and tenure rights, and environmental issues that inform peoples' attitudes towards transformative resource governance. Research activities included data collection and meetings with key stakeholders. The kind of data collected were documentations on the customary land/resource governance systems and narratives on the social and environmental risks emanating from resources exploitation by multi-national corporations (operating in partnership with national governments) in the communities.

The stakeholders included individuals from private and state institutions, civil society organisations, research organisations and community members from the case study areas. All stakeholders were interviewed about their experiences in resource governance and their perspectives on improvements through radical changes. Among the stakeholders, researcher provided a scientific analysis of the data collected. Local people provided resource governance experiences from their communities. Individuals

Box 1 Key issues addressed in the co-design phase

Objectives:

- Explore needs for transformative resource governance across case studies in the four countries.
- Investigate how people in the case-study areas perceive transformative change.
- Identify ways to initiate transformative resource governance in the communities.

Research questions (emerging from the co-design):

- What do we know about transformative change and resource governance in the case studies? What does transformative social change mean to the people?
- To what extent do prevailing natural resource governance frameworks shape the trajectories of transformative change?
- What are the drivers and who are the agents of transformation and resource governance? How can transformative social change be created there?
- What are the existing local narratives of crises/conflicts resulting from social change and poor natural resource governance?

from private and public institutions provided information concerning the feasibility and policy implications of the ideas generated respectively. [Table 1](#) is a summary of the key findings and activities in the case studies.

The project outcome was the formulation of a framework for engendering transformative change in resource governance based on experiences derived from the case studies ([Figure 1](#)). The framework suggests that transformation can begin by *instituting social land tenure niches* [17] to create a knowledge base that encourages new ideas for eschewing the status quo of land/natural resource governance. It is expected to lead to the emergence of a *new land and natural resource tenure regime* (second phase). In this second phase, we anticipate the necessity to encourage new transformative elements (e.g. policy or cultural changes, spatial information infrastructure) in line with a social system that can lead to *new land and natural rights and benefits landscape* (third phase). This is only possible if communities adopt new societal values that are derived from land/natural resource regimes which support land acquisition and compensation practices that are beneficial to communities. We expect this to enable *transformative resource governance* to emerge (fourth stage). The entire change scenario depends on the premise that transformation comes about through profound, complex and multi-dimensional processes — which would involve multiple actors — based on planned or unplanned efforts. This corresponds with literature on transformation of the social [18], political [19], human settlements [20], economic governance and power relations [21], cultural [22]. However, as this article focuses on reporting the co-design procedure undertaken during the project — rather than its outcome — we have provided this overview of the transformation process to place the co-design phase of our research in context.

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