



## Review

# Diversity in success: Interaction between external interventions and local actions in three rice farming areas in Benin



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## ABSTRACT

Since the rice crisis of 2007, the government of Benin has initiated many programmes for rice intensification. Comparison of three rice production areas shows that local rice production has indeed been increased by the facilities provided by the government programmes. Although broadly the same facilities (market outlet, credit, input, etc.) were provided to rice farmers in the three study areas, which are located close to one another, there are not only similar, but also some different outcomes with regard to farmers' practices. There were also some unexpected changes, like the shift from limited collective canal cleaning to individual canal cleaning in Koussin-Lélé and the use of pumps in upland areas in Bamè. The study explores the interplay between these external interventions of government programmes and local actions of farmers to explain the outcomes. Using an actor-oriented perspective, the study concludes that farmers' agency played a critical role in the success of interventions; the changes occurred because of local actions of the farmers and intermediaries interacting with the external interventions at diverse junctures. Differences in strategies for resolving livelihood problems, in production options and biophysical conditions influence farmers' local actions and contribute to the explanation of the diversity of outcomes. The main lesson drawn from this research is that evaluation studies should not consider external interventions as the only or primary source of change. The dynamic interplay between local agency, intermediation and external interventions makes room for change.

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## Contents

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| 1. Introduction .....   | 120 |
| 2. Theoretical framework .....  | 120 |
| 3. Research design .....  | 121 |
| 4. Interventions and outcomes .....   | 122 |
| 4.1. National intervention programmes .....                                   | 123 |
| 4.2. Rice intensification and revenues .....                                  | 123 |
| 4.3. Changes in social practices .....  | 123 |
| 4.3.1. Rice production .....  | 123 |
| 4.3.2. Rice selling .....   | 124 |
| 4.3.3. Agricultural financing .....   | 124 |
| 4.3.4. Water management .....   | 124 |
| 5. Understanding the evolution of changed practices .....                     | 125 |
| 5.1. From collective to individual canal cleaning rules in Koussin-Lélé ..... | 125 |
| 5.2. Starting to use the uplands for rice production in Bamè .....            | 126 |
| 5.3. From growing vegetables and maize only to growing rice in Zonmon .....   | 127 |
| 6. Analysis and discussion .....  | 128 |
| 6.1. Interplay between interventions and local agency .....                   | 128 |
| 6.2. Factors shaping diversity of outcomes .....                              | 128 |
| 6.2.1. Subsistence strategies influencing diverse responses .....             | 128 |

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|        |  |     |
|--------|--|-----|
| 6.2.2. | Conflicts as catalyst for change .....   | 128 |
| 6.2.3. | Alternative production options and natural circumstances as elements of difference ..... | 129 |
| 6.3.   | Implications for evaluating external interventions .....                                 | 129 |
| 7.     | Conclusions .....  | 129 |
|        | Acknowledgements .....   | 130 |
|        | References .....   | 130 |

## 1. Introduction

Developing irrigation facilities for agricultural purposes has always been an issue of interest for public actors (IFAD, 2008; Sharma, 2004). Soon after independence in the 1960s, the Benin government created nearly 2,236 ha of command areas, used mainly for rice production with the assistance of Chinese projects (Sodjinou et al., 2008). The termination of this project in 1979 and the gradual structural reforms of the economy led to the collapse of these irrigation schemes, and rice production declined. Numerous interventions through successive generations of projects were undertaken to increase local rice production (e.g. *Société d'Aménagement de la Vallée de l'Ouémé* (SADEVO), *Société Nationale d'Irrigation et d'Aménagement Hydro-agricole* (SONIAH)). However, studies suggested that these projects had limited success (Abiassi and Eclou, 2006; Adegbola and Singbo, 2005) because they had underestimated the complexity of the social context (Vincent and Roth, 2013).

Since 2007, a new generation of programmes has been crafted that provide institutional conditions for farmers to improve rice production. The government has provided subsidies on seeds and fertiliser, as well as credit and a market facility for local rice intensification. The government's investment is supposed to lead to new models of rice production and trade (MAEP, 2010). Between 2007 and 2012, rice production increased from 47,000 to 96,000 t in Benin (Index-Mundi, 2012). The intervention programmes have been successful in providing access to formal credit and the market to most rice farmers. The same facilities were provided to rice farmers in three study areas located close to one another with similar, but also different, outcomes regarding farmers' social practices.

Numerous studies have portrayed interventionists in 'heroic' terms, as authors of positive changes in local areas (Hawkins et al., 2001; Khavul et al., 2013; Rollnick et al., 1992); less attention has been given to the initiatives that local actors take to create space for change (Janssen and van Ittersum, 2007; Morgan, 2001; Paul, 1987). Local actors have often been regarded as passive adopters of externally devised interventions (Kristjansson et al., 2002; Long, 2001). Such analysis does not capture the complexity of change processes (Chizema and Buck, 2006; Walters et al., 1999). Therefore, this research studies the interplay between external interventions and local actions of farmers. The following research questions are addressed: (1) what are the changes in the social practices of actors in the rice value chains in the three areas? (2) How did the external interventions interact with the actions of farmers in the three areas? (3) To the extent that the outcomes are different, why did similar interventions lead to the diverse changes in social practices? And (4) how did the interplay between the interventions and local agency make room for change?

We start with the description of the actor-oriented theoretical perspective used to analyse the findings. Then we turn to the design of the research, based on chronological causal reasoning constructed around the timelines of the key events drawn from interviews and observations. The changes in social practices are presented in two sections. The first section presents the changes in social practices in comparison with the baseline situation (Section 4). The second section describes the key events chronologically (Section 5). For each event, the immediate outcomes of the interplay between the external interventions of the government programmes and farmers' local actions are highlighted. After

analysis of the main factors influencing the diversity of the outcomes, the implications for evaluating external interventions are reflected on in the Section 6.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The intervention programmes are specifically designed to intensify rice production (higher yields and more production cycles). The interventions' effect on farmers' social practices was investigated in relation to rice production and the wider impacts on farmers' livelihoods in terms of rice yield, rice production and income. In this study, we consider social practices as the daily activities of people in their social, cultural, economic and political contexts (Shay, 2008).

We assume that the external interventions do not directly affect the social practices, but that social change results from the interplay between interventions (state-directed as well as NGOs' interventions) and farmers' local actions. According to this assumption, the change process is recursively shaped by two processes: (1) the on-going practices of people who try to accommodate themselves to everyday contingencies and (2) external institutional forces (Cunha and Cunha, 2003).

The intervention programmes fit well with the theoretical assumption in some recent studies that argue that institutions at a higher than local level are needed to provide smallholders the necessary conditions to create local opportunities and improve their livelihoods (Hounkonnou et al., 2012; Pal et al., 2002; Roling et al., 2012).

Notwithstanding the valuable contributions of the actor-oriented approach to policy studies, it does not pay much attention to institutional contexts and their effect on actors' agency (Giddens and Audet, 2005). In this study, we regard the interventions constituted by government programmes as new institutional contexts for local situations. We analyse whether the interventions provide enabling or hindering conditions for the changes observed in the research areas.

Long (2001, 17) explains that the way people make use of the external interventions rests fundamentally on how each agent 'translates' the interventions in accordance with his/her own interest. When people make use of externally recommended options, they try to create space for their own interests and make a choice among options that best fit with their own needs (van der Ploeg and Long, 1994; Verbole, 2000). The interplay between external interventions and local dynamics can be described in terms of what Long (2001, 15) defined as an 'interface', i.e. the point where different life-worlds and social fields intersect. The interface is also assimilated to arena, a social space of interaction and encounter (de Sardan, 1995, 185; Hasselskog, 2009, 10). In this study, we consider the arena of interest to be the local rice production system where the encounter between farmers and government interventions gives rise to a new set of interactions. As diverse goals and rationales are brought into contact in the arena, a clash of expectations is likely. That is, we take it as inherent in the idea of an arena that there will be competing interests and rationales, and hence also tension and conflict (Long, 2001, 59). Rarely does a development project, policy or process create only winners (Kanbur, 2003). With interventions, there are winners and losers, and thus interventions are accompanied by conflicts.

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