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Research papers

Delivering public interest goods in Africa. Stopgap measures, state reform, and commons

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Delivering public interest goods in Africa

Stopgap measures, state reform, and commons

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Résumé
Étant donné la polysémie du concept de communs, nous utilisons le concept de biens d'intérêt général, dont le contenu varie selon les situations historiques. En Afrique, différentes institutions (modes de gouvernance) délivrent des biens d'intérêt général, chacune selon ses propres règles du jeu et normes pratiques : l'État, l'aide au développement, les associations, les municipalités, les chefferies, les structures religieuses, les mécènes et le secteur privé. La mauvaise qualité des services délivrés par l'État, qui est pourtant l'objet des plus fortes attentes, engendre diverses formes de délivrance palliative, en particulier à partir du mode de gouvernance associatif (qui inclut certains communs). Mais les associations sont le plus souvent très dépendantes de l'aide extérieure, et leurs activités disparaissent en général quand l'aide prend fin. Toute réforme pérenne des services publics implique donc de s'appuyer sur les acteurs innovants au sein de la fonction publique elle-même (mode de gouvernance bureaucratique-étatique), tout en nouant des collaborations avec des acteurs innovants au sein en particulier du monde associatif et des municipalités, mais éventuellement d'autres modes de gouvernance, dans une perspective de réduction de la dépendance à l'aide.

Abstract

Given the polysemy of the concept of "commons," we use the concept of "public interest goods," the content of which varies according to historical situations. In Africa, different institutions (modes of governance) deliver public goods and services, each according to its own rules and practical norms: the state, development aid, associations, municipalities, chieftaincies, religious structures, sponsors, and the private sector. The poor quality of services delivered by the state, for which many nevertheless have the highest expectations, generates various forms of stopgap delivery, in particular from the associational mode of governance (which includes some commons). However voluntary organizations are most often very dependent on external aid, and their activities generally disappear when the aid ends. Any lasting reform of public services therefore involves relying on innovative actors within governmental bodies (bureaucratic mode of governance), while forging collaborations with innovative actors within the voluntary sector and municipalities in particular, but possibly with other modes of governance, with a view to reducing aid dependency.

Introduction

The relationship between commons (itself a multifaceted term) and states is far from simple and is typically expressed in confrontational terms. Generally speaking, it can be considered from three relatively different perspectives, although these do sometimes overlap.

1) Public goods are withdrawn from the market through the creation of a new system of rights and management involving the recipients (or users) to avoid those goods being privatized by a neoliberal state that subscribes to the principles of "New Public Management". The expectation is that the nation state will subsequently recognize the new system. The example of water in Italy and the Rodotà commission immediately comes to mind (Carrozza and Fantini 2013; Orsi 2018). What are often referred to as "global public goods" face fairly similar challenges, although in international terms these remain a slogan and not a reality (Leyronas and Bambridge 2018).

2) To overcome the vertical structure and centralized system of a state, initiative and responsibility are returned to ordinary citizens through support for a variety of voluntary organizations, community-based monitoring measures, the social economy, and campaigning groups. These stakeholders are considered more effective than overly hierarchical bureaucratic bodies and institutions (Alix et al. 2018). For example, Elinor Ostrom's research (Ostrom et al. 1973) demonstrated that a police force managed by neighborhood asso-ciations performed better than a traditional urban police force. Another example would be the advantages of the bodies responsible for "common-pool resources" (CPR) that have now expanded into other types of commons,

reaching far beyond just natural resources to include urban areas (Borch and Kornberger 2015). The notion that state business can be better managed by self-organized citizen groups has similarities with some European political traditions that are hostile to the idea of a centralized state (Proudhonism, the cooperative movement, and self-governance).

3) Finally, in a variation on the above, major state failings in terms of delivering the public services for which they are responsible leads to local and community solutions by default. These "stopgap" measures are particularly noticeable in Africa, where public services are generally in a poor state, and they will be our main area of focus. This "band-aid" approach to service delivery usually involves parties from a variety of backgrounds, including the voluntary sector.

However, formal and informal community or voluntary groups (together often referred to as "commons") in Africa face problems rarely seen in Western nations (and where they do exist, they are more discreet). We will discuss two of these challenges. The first is dependance on external aid, including within "civil society" (an unavoidable term in the development world that at least partly covers what is understood by "commons"). The second problem concerns the notions of "community" and "traditions." The association of these concepts with "commons" can be overly hasty in relation to Africa and they do much to spread clichés that contradict detailed empirical social science research.

Furthermore, internal reform of public services risks being "forgotten" in an approach that is exclusively focused on

community- and volunteer-based stopgap innovations. Such measures could eventually be seen as the only way to strengthen public services. Without denying the important role played by this kind of external pressure, we will therefore consider the crucial challenge of encouraging "bottom-up" innovations within public services themselves.

We will use the terminology we have developed over the course of thirty years of research on development projects, public services, and public policies: "Public interest goods," "local modes of governance," and "co-delivery." However, we will, of course, try to establish various connections with the semantic sphere of commons, particularly in our conclusion.

Finally, we should clarify that the empirical material underpinning this analysis has been produced collectively. Studies have been carried out by all of LASDEL's researchers (who together form what one might call a "scientific commons")[1] over the course of more than twenty years, mainly in Niger and Benin, as well as in other French-speaking countries in West and Central Africa.

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[1] LASDEL is an independent Nigerien and Beninese social sciences research center focusing principally on public services delivery, public policies, and the activities of development programs. The results of its research are freely available at: *www.lasdel.net*. The book *La revanche des contextes. Des mésaventures de l'ingénierie sociale en Afrique et au-delà* (Olivier de Sardan 2021) is largely based on these results. The same book also contains a detailed analysis of "travelingmodels" in social engineering, the "practical norms" of state officials, development-project-based and bureaucratic "modes of governance," and "contextual experts."

1. Public interest goods

The notion of commons is often approached on the basis of what we may call an "entity-based" perspective, inherited from Samuelson (1954) and used, albeit with some modifications, by Ostrom (1990). On the basis of objective factors, this approach seeks to define a stable whole—a natural entity—with its own boundaries. It introduces dividing lines between: common goods and private goods; club goods and common-pool resources (CPR); pure public goods and impure public goods; and global common goods, local common goods, and collective goods. Other approaches attempt to define commons not on the basis of the nature of the resources concerned, but rather on their use or purpose. As a result, they distinguish between common goods, social commons, and commons or common in the singular (Bardhan and Ray 2008; Ballet 2008; Hervé and Gallenga 2019; Leyronas and Bambridge 2018; Coriat et al. 2020). Consequently, there is quite a lot of confusion over what each group understands by the word "common." Its lowest common denominator appears to be a positive value conferred upon various forms of non-state and non-market collective action.

However, the formal classifications resulting from more empirical and clearly circumscribed approaches might be preferred. For example, one recent proposition (Lavigne Delville, Ancey, and Fache 2022) with a particular focus on Africa provides a better understanding of the complexity of the diverse realities referred to as "commons" by substituting that term with the concept of "shared access resources governance."[2] "Commons," in its strictest sense, is therefore applied to a particular form of governance where resources are reserved for exclusive collective access limited to appropriators.

In this article, we will use the expression "public interest goods" to describe any goods and services that conventional wisdom (widespread public opinion) considers should be available to all at a given moment and in a given location, without prejudice to the forms, rights, uses, and modes of governance related to their access. This perspective is based on the emic perceptions of the social groups under consideration that vary according to local or historical contexts.

> Goods such as water, healthcare, markets, security, education, justice, and famine relief are all real concerns shared by people in the Sahel. Their expectations in this respect are high. They think not only that the state and the political authorities have obligations therein (and therefore deplore their failures and shortfalls), but also that no stone should be left unturned to find other solutions to fill the gap.
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> These goods are perceived by all to be indispensable to all. In other words, they are widely understood to be in the public interest. However, the conditions for delivering these goods are predominantly local (although they do involve non-local stakeholders) because people drink, are protected, sell their animals, and give birth locally.

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2   Translator's note: Our translation from French. Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

The meaning of public interest goods can also be very localized. All those living at our research sites in Niger clearly have a rough understanding of what it means. Public interest goods (unlike "commons") can also be relatively easily translated into local languages. In Zarma, one might say *han kan ga borey kul nafa* ("something benefiting everyone") or *bor kul wone* ("something belonging to everyone"). In Hausa, it would be *mai ma kowa anfani* or *na kowa*. In more concrete terms, one might say for example in Zarma *koyra kul deyo* ("wells for everyone" or "everyone's wells").

The existence of a broad consensus among both users and service providers in a given context therefore determines whether goods do (or do not) serve the public interest (. . .). Incidentally, bread was a very important public interest good [in Europe] long ago. Riots would break out if supplies ran short or its price became excessive. In this respect, Thompson's classic work on the "moral economy" (Thompson 1971; Scott 1976) is worth revisiting. Subjects hold the sovereign responsible for what they perceive to be a public interest good. In other contexts, and in the event of price rises or scarcity, other foodstuffs considered indispensable to the lives of the population sometimes become public interest goods. Their price or shortages thereof form the basis for massive popular protests, as Vincent Bonnecase (2011) demonstrated with regard to the Sahel.

(Olivier de Sardan 2021)

In all the African countries that have been the subject of LASDEL's research, expectations surrounding the delivery of public interest goods focus predominantly on the state. These are "public services" in the ordinary sense of the word and this is the one that we will use here. In other words, they are public interest goods delivered by government bodies and agencies, i.e., the "state apparatuses" (Althusser 1970).

However, other parties operating at local levels in each country also deliver public goods. Chieftaincies provide hospitality, mediation, security, and information. The jurisdiction of mayors covers healthcare, education, policing, and social welfare. Sponsors build free clinics and provide relief in the event of shortages. Church-based healthcare centers, as well as Catholic, Protestant, and Islamic schools, proliferate alongside a flourishing private sector in these two fields. Development projects reach the most remote rural areas, providing resources, jobs, services, technical support, organizational architecture, and humanitarian aid. Cooperatives, farmers' and women's organizations, management committees, development associations, and national nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are numerous.

All these diverse parties deliver public goods in an organized form. They each have their own specific goals and rules (formal norms). We call them "local modes of governance." Moreover, informal norms, or "practical norms," could be combined with formal norms if practical norms are understood to mean relatively regulated, routine and convergent deviations from these formal norms. In other words, there are relatively commonplace and predictable discrepancies in every set of formal norms typical of each mode of governance.. That said, some practical norms do cut across modes of governance. For example, bureaucratic, municipal, and associational modes of governance share a

generalized absence of the use of sanctions in the event of wrongdoing (embezzlement, abuse of power, favoritism, absenteeism, protocol breaches, for instance).[3]

The bureaucratic mode of governance is therefore far from being the only one on track. However, it is the one that generates the highest expectations.

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[3] See Souley and Hahonou 2004; Olivier de Sardan, Bako, and Harouna 2019. Ostrom's pioneer approach is limited by the fact that she essentially focuses on the formal rules produced by commoners, without considering the often significant regulated deviations from these rules (the practical norms). However, she does sometimes refer to the existence of "practical rules" or "de facto rules" (Ostrom 1992), but does not develop this point any further, may be because she is seeking structural invariants ("universal building blocks," Ostrom 2005, 5) contained within an institutional grammar (Chanteau and Labrousse 2013, 9), as demonstrated in her various typologies i of (formal) rules within commons (Ostrom 2008).

2. Public services and unmet demand in Africa

Public services delivered by the bureaucratic mode of governance (or, more simply, state public services) are in profound crisis in Niger and Africa more generally. Despite a very important extension in terms of coverage since independence (many more schools, healthcare centers, judicial courts, police stations, and support in case of hunger), users in most countries overwhelmingly criticize their very poor quality: too many incompetent, poorly trained, and poorly paid contractual teachers; too many grasping, dismissive and absentee healthcare staff; too many corrupt judges vassals of power; too many violent police officers involved in racketeering; and too much embezzled aid.

> In the past, public schools played a key role in forming the citizens of the new states and developing the elite groups of the future (teachers were role models). Today, following the disaster of structural adjustment and the almost exclusive focus on the number of children attending school (in terms of development goals), they have become schools reserved for the poor. Their reputation has suffered as their pupils do not go on to find work (merchants and the ulama have become the new role models). Both the upper and middle classes send their children to private schools (Olivier de Sardan, Bako, and Harouna 2019).

Furthermore, these public services are only just hanging on thanks to external aid, with the exception of a few "pockets of effectiveness" (Leonard 2010; Roll 2015) which are all the more remarkable. Without this aid, the public school, healthcare, and judicial systems, as well as public security and humanitarian assistance, would be in an even worse state. Their failure is therefore also perceived as a failure of the nonetheless considerable international aid.

Nevertheless, despite these almost unanimous criticisms, demand on the state remains strong everywhere. It is expressed through bitter observations of the failings of the current states and a powerful nostalgia for a past when public services may have been less accessible to most people but were of a better standard (under the single party regimes at the beginning of independence and the military regimes that replaced them). Research carried out over twenty years reveals extremely widespread expectations of public services delivered by the state, a state that people want to be protective and equitable—the polar opposite of most current regimes.

Moreover, the Sahel crisis and the advance of the jihadist insurrection are evidence of the devastating effects of state weakness and the failure of public services. In the medium-term, fundamental reform of government bodies and the public sector, (re)construction of local public services to an acceptable standard, and the transformation of repressive states involved in cronyism and racketeering into fair and protective ones capable of delivering public services are clearly major popular demands and are politically imperative. This poses a problem in view of the strategies of many development bodies. They often tend to circumvent or ignore the states themselves in order to focus on "civil society," i.e., the voluntary sector.[4]

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4   The major development agencies do, of course, support states and some of their services, both financially and technically. Moreover, they also initiate numerous projects to reform those states. However, the development industry often prefers to bypass states in favor of the local voluntary sector.

3. The eight local modes of governance

We have identified eight local modes of governance in Niger and Benin, most of which can also be found in the majority of African countries, albeit it with their own nuances and arrangements: *bureaucratic* (delivery of public services by the state and according to its rules), *development-project-based* (delivery by development aid and humanitarian institutions according to their rules), *associational* (delivery by voluntary organizations and national NGOs according to their rules), *municipal* (delivery by mayors according to their rules), *chief-based* (delivery by "traditional" chiefs according to their rules), *religious* (delivery by Christian or Islamic religious institutions according to their rules), *sponsorship-based* (delivery by local citizens who have had success in urban areas or who have emigrated, according to their rules), and *merchant* (delivery by private economic operators according to their rules). These modes of governance can be found in every country, including in marginalized rural areas.

Several of them—the development-project-based, sponsorship-based, chief-based, and even religious forms of governance (despite various exceptions as regards the latter)—are absent in Europe or only have a minor role to play in terms of delivering public services.

Most of these eight modes of governance are a long way from what is generally referred to as commons in their widest sense. They are not founded on any direct popular participation in managing public services and even less on a shared design of their rules of delivery.

> Chieftaincies, presented as "traditional" but in fact inherited from the administrative chieftaincy introduced by the French colonizers, concentrate various powers within the hands of the chief alone. In most cases, he defends patriarchal, aristocratic, and unequal values (discrimination toward the descendants of slaves or families who arrived long after the village was founded).

> In Niger, sponsors are prominent business leaders who have made their fortune overseas and political public figures established in urban areas. They invest in their home village or region, generally on the basis of cronyism. They pay for a village pump, finance a school refurbishment or the construction of a mosque, and provide sacks of rice in case of hunger, while supporting the electoral campaign of one of their protégées.

On the other hand, the associational mode of governance would seem a priori eligible for an analysis in terms of commons. The municipal mode of governance could potentially make a similar claim, but its case is weaker because of its administrative nature, its state ties, and its traditional electoral form. As for the merchant mode of governance, in direct opposition to the perspective of commons, the actual effects of the privatizations encouraged by some funders are often very different to what was expected.

3.1. The associational mode of governance

In terms of the associational mode of governance, upon closer inspection things are significantly more complicated. First, a distinction must be drawn between: (a) traditional informal voluntary associations; (b) formal associations relying on international aid; and (c) formal associations operating independently of international aid.

3.1.1. Traditional informal associations

Traditional informal associations in their strictest sense (originating before colonialization) are increasingly rare. Farms sometimes involving more than a hundred people all working under the authority of the patriarch have practically disappeared. In most cases, groups of a similar age working cooperatively have vanished. Collective initiation ceremonies have become exceedingly rare.

However, a large number of neo-traditional informal associations have emerged. These include vigilantes more or less based on ethnicity and composed of "hunters" (*dozo* in Bambara, *mbanga* in Hausa), neighborhood sociability groups (*grins* in Mali, *faada* in Niger), weekly women's meetings (*foyandi* in Niger), and tontine savings communities. Although tontine groups can fall within the category of commons in the broadest sense (they would be club goods according to Ostrom's classification), they fall far short of delivering a public good. As for the hunters associations, while certainly delivering a public good (security—although they also sometimes create insecurity), they are profoundly hierarchical in nature.

A fairly widespread body of opinion holds that traditional Africa (i.e., precolonial Africa) was supposedly a haven for community-based practices that simply need to be revived. This is both historically biased (precolonial Africa was also a place of wars, raids, slavery, divisions, and local rivalries) and illusory (contemporary Africa has little in common with the Africa of the end of the nineteenth century: the collective structures have been fundamentally changed and has often fallen apart, mreover, the "invention of tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger 2012) is practiced just as much as, if not more than, elsewhere in the world).

3.1.2. Formal associations relying on international aid

Most of the voluntary sector actually consists of diverse formal organizations created at the initiative of development programs funded by Technical and Financial Partners (TFPs—aid agencies, international institutions, and NGOs from the Global North). In rural areas, they are cooperatives, farmers' groups, women's groups, and management committees of all kinds created by rural development projects over the years. In urban areas, they include countless national NGOs and those promoting human rights, seeking to combat slavery or corruption, and supporting consumers. All have received or are receiving support from the development industry. In effect, for several decades this industry has targeted the local voluntary sector as the preferred recipient of its support or as a valuable assistant in its operations. It has often made the involvement of "civil society" a condition of funding with governments. This "civil society" has therefore become a key partner promoted by funders and, in most cases, is accepted with bad grace by states.

The term "civil society" can be misleading. It is inflationary insofar as it tends to imply that any association is an expression of "civil society" and therefore implicitly a representative of society itself (excluding the state). However, in practice "civil society" can essentially be broken down into two

components: the union sector and the voluntary sector. In most cases, the latter only represents itself. A farmers' group supported by ten farmers in a village that contains eighty of them generally represents ten farmers, not eighty, and certainly not all the farmers in the district. The management committee of a borehole that is supposed to have been "elected" by the "community" has often been appointed by the village chief and is frequently criticized by users because he treats the borehole as his own personal resource (Olivier de Sardan and Dagobi 2000).

The fact that an organization is acting to defend a matter of public interest does not magically turn it into an authorized representative of all those affected by that cause. Consider, for example, an NGO working in the field of HIV/AIDs prevention. Its only mandate is that of its members. It does not represent all those living with HIV/AIDs or all those who want to protect themselves from it. Of course it is very laudable to campaign against climate change or in support of universal healthcare, seek to extend an organization's reach well beyond the immediate interests of its members, and receive recognition in this respect from a state or an international institution. Indeed, in some instances (long-term activism with a large potential audience for example), it can form the basis for some moral or political legitimacy. However, that does not mean that the criteria for effective representativeness can be ignored. In terms of healthcare, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation is more powerful than any African state. It seeks to serve the public good, but it remains the expression of the desire of a few individuals. The same is true of a local organization in Niger that targets the same goals despite its lack of means. Any organization can be assessed on the basis of its impact, audience, goals, and representativeness, but these criteria remain clearly distinct.

Similar reservations surround the term "community." It implies consensus, a "community illusion," that is often far from the reality. African villages are just as divided and mired in jealousies, contradictions, and infighting as any other village in the world.[5]

> All LASDEL's researchers know that, to obtain a variety of perspectives and avoid the illusion of homogeneity, interviews with a village chief in Niger must be followed by one with the cousin or nephew who had been his unfortunate election opponent (only members of the ruling family can be elected chief of a village or district). As a chief is elected for life, the unsuccessful relative will also remain an opponent for life.
>
> Over the course of our research in Niger, Benin, Mali, Guinea, and the Central African Republic, divisions, power grabs, and accusations of poor management have been a constant in the history of management committees, cooperatives, and village associations.
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> In the Songhay-Zarma language (spoken in Niger, Mali, and Benin), the word *baab-izey* refers to children who have the same father but different mothers. However, its meaning goes beyond simple kinship. It is also used to describe the jealousy, rivalry, and competition that characterize the (many) local conflicts—particularly within the political domain between members of the same party (Olivier de Sardan 2017) and within the voluntary sector.

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5   This is another objection to Ostrom's work. In the commons she describes, conflicts are supposed to be resolved according to rules accepted by all members because they were developed with their agreement (Lavigne Delville 2009). Real life is often very different.

Whether it is called "civil society" or "community participation," the modern voluntary sector delivering public services is heavily dependent on development aid and humanitarian aid. To receive such assistance, associations and committees must present a positive image suggestive of a united village and a cohesive membership. They must sustain the "community illusion" that can also take the form of a "commons illusion." As well as funding the national voluntary sector and supporting it with technical matters, TFPs also provide it with the rules that should govern its "constitution," in accordance with the classification proposed by Ostrom (2005). Sometimes, they even provide its "collective rules," leaving the sector itself little more than the "operational rules." The "participatory imperative" imposed by funders (an oxymoron that epitomizes the ambiguity of much international aid) is the polar opposite of the "bottom-up" development of shared rules theorized by Ostrom. The organizational structure of the voluntary sector in the West (with its annual general assembly, elected board, and chair) is imported, even imposed, in its entirety. As this structure is ill-suited to local contexts in most cases, it is consequently often dismantled or bypassed (on cash transfers in Niger, see Olivier de Sardan and Hamani 2018). National NGOs operate as subcontractors to international NGOs and must submit to their terms of reference, their accounting rules, and their administrative procedures. The main voluntary leaders are quickly recruited by the aid industry where they become part of the system. More often than not, when funding dries up the organizations depending on it disappear (for the example of waste and sanitation in Niger, see Blundo 2003 and Hahonou 2003, and for water see Issa 2011).

> Land committees (*commissions foncières* or COFO) in Niger initially appear to be a success story: When settling land conflicts that the state is unable to manage, granting property titles, or marking out herding corridors, all stakeholders (state representatives, mayors, breeder associations, chieftaincies, and NGOs operating in this area) are involved at various levels (province, municipality, and village). Nevertheless, LASDEL's research has demonstrated that the only COFOs that truly work are those supported by a "project" (providing means of transport, mission expenses, and the salary of an executive secretary). The others only exist on paper.

> Development projects initiated and funded by African migrants in France (particularly those from Senegal and Mali) are also not immune from such misfortune. Various studies (Lavigne Delville 1991; Daum 1998) have demonstrated that they frequently experience the same fate as programs supported by TFPs. They too functioned as "rent" providers. Organizations are set up locally to receive these "rents" but then disappear when the money dries up.

Of course, there are some exceptions and they are particularly interesting. Some organizations, some associations, and some management committees do survive after this external infusion of money. They are rare but these "survivors" might then be described as commons in the usual (and relatively vague) sense of the word.

> One positive example of a survivor-type common in the provisional public services sector is the case of some water user network associations (ASUREPs) operating on the periphery of Kinshasa in areas not covered by the national water company Regideso. Originally set up by a local NGO (Action pour le développement des infrastructures en milieu rural—ADIR Congo) (Action for the Development of Infrastructure in Rural Areas in Congo) that still plays a central

role (Bédécarrats et al. 2019), the system also receives significant support from TFPs. The user associations are closely involved in the process to put in place the appropriate infrastructure including, in particular, a team of employees responsible for day-to-day management of the network. Revenue from the sale of water covers the system's maintenance costs and any profits are reinvested back into local social activities. It would appear that, after external support has come to an end, some ASUREPS have not only managed to keep going but have actually expanded their work beyond the water sector.

In fact, sustainability and real local momentum can only really be evaluated in the years following the end of any aid. However, the development industry rarely requires programs to be assessed five years after their completion and that is a great pity. It is heartening that a qualitative assessment of the ASUREP water associations several years after aid came to an end has been launched.

The "why" behind these exceptions is still to be documented. Mention is often made of the existence of charismatic leaders (what others call "commons entrepreneurs" or "holders of the commons"). However, such a leader is no guarantee that an organization can become an established, permanent institution in the long-term, as all readers of Max Weber know. Other factors clearly come into play. For example, the existence of individual monetary gains, combined with collective self-financing of the organization, can explain how such organizations survive or are reproduced over time.

This is true of the cotton producers cooperatives. For decades, these organizations have been an essential part of the cotton marketing process in all applicable African countries. After producers have received their individual payments, the process includes a system of dividends paid retrospectively into a cooperative's account. In most cases, these dividends are allocated to finance community facilities, something that is usually the responsibility of municipalities or the state.

This is certainly an area where detailed research would be welcome, but it should use a rigorous socio-anthropological approach involving real fieldwork. Such research could document any implementation gaps, unexpected results, or disparity between official discourse and figures and actual practices. Unfortunately, this is a field where doublespeak, circumvention strategies, attempts to give the "right answer" to surveys, and a lack of reliable figures are widespread practical norms.

3.1.3. Formal associations operating independently of international aid

This final category, i.e., formal associations that have developed and been active for some time without significant external aid, might also be analyzed in terms of commons. Although we do not have any examples to provide, this does not mean that such organizations do not exist, but rather simply that they are rare. Once again, thorough research into this subject would be useful.

3.2. The municipal mode of governance

The theme of public services resonates strongly within municipalities and local authorities do have some powers in terms of healthcare, education, social welfare, and security. However, typically they do not have the necessary financial and human means. Moreover, the state provides them with barely any help to implement their powers.

> In 2013 and 2015, LASDEL organized workshops with forty mayors from villages in Niger where our center had been carrying out research for a number of years. These events revealed that improving the quality of the services provided by teachers and nurses (often considered poor or appalling) was a priority for the elected representatives. They very clearly sought to position themselves on the side of service users and criticized the fact that the state was unable to promote reforms or give the mayors any means to act.

From a theoretical point of view, municipalities—or *communes* in francophone contexts—are not considered commons in academic literature on this subject, despite their semantic similarity in French. This is because they were established on the basis of electoral representativeness, their operating rules are drawn up nationally, and they form the final rung on the state ladder. However, some municipal representatives are particularly focused on public services and specifically defending users and citizens. Their proximity to the latter means that they can play a major role in the provisional management of those citizens' needs and demands through their contact with both the state and funders.

> Medical evacuations are a critical issue, particularly when they involve dystocia requiring a cesarean. Ambulances are available in district capitals, but the cost of petrol and the driver's fee must be paid by users. A number of mayors in Niger have decided to absorb these costs because they are either too high for many households or families have not had time to make provisions for them.

> Similarly, some mayors purchase books for primary school children (in some instances in collaboration with the parent association), having been let down by the state which is supposed to provide them.

3.3. The merchant mode of governance

This category merits further discussion because it often acts as a stopgap in the provision of public services. Delegating the functions of delivery of public interest goods (or, more specifically, a public service) to private economic operators is not necessarily a condition imposed by international institutions in the name of neoliberal ideology (although that is sometimes the case, as structural adjustment demonstrated in its time). It can also be a sector-specific or local stopgap strategy to find an effective solution in instances where the state, or sometimes community-based management initiated by TFPs, has failed. However, the merchant mode of governance is not a miracle solution and it too frequently fails.

For many years, Niger's boreholes were managed centrally by the state through a dedicated agency, the Office for Groundwater (Office des eaux du sous-sol or OFEDES). Confronted by dilapidated equipment due to a lack of maintenance and at the initiative of aid agencies, groundwater management was passed to the community. Elected management committees operated across rural areas, in accordance with the community and participatory model so dear to funders. After two decades, this model too proved itself to be inefficient. A third governance method was therefore established, again by aid agencies. Now groundwater is managed by a private operator on the basis of a public service outsourcing agreement. Its work is monitored by a water users' association. However, assessment of maintenance of the facilities barely paints a better picture. In most instances, the service provider has not carried out the maintenance and servicing commitments provided for in the specifications (Olivier de Sardan and Mohamadou 2019).

User fees are not only relevant to the merchant mode of governance. They can also be introduced within bureaucratic governance (see cost recovery in healthcare) and associational governance (see management committees for water that must also be paid for). They are used increasingly frequently as a stopgap. However, they are not the only option. In fact, in the face of a public services crisis that the state appears incapable of resolving, a multifaceted combination of "stopgap" co-delivery can be observed where users are not the only ones putting their hands in their pockets.

3.4. "Stopgap" co-delivery

Right across Africa, stopgap measures similar to what Ostrom, who subscribed to the concept of polycentric governance (Chanteau and Labrousse 2013), called the "coproduction of public services"[6] can be observed in an attempt to compensate for shortcomings in public services.[7]

In this respect, water and sanitation are priority areas, "involving multiple stakeholders for shared management" (Durand, Cavé, and Salenson 2021, 15).[8] "Commons" are therefore often involved in both Europe and Africa (Micheaux and Aggeri 2019). On this subject, "hybrid governance" should also be addressed (Baron and Bonnassieux 2013). However, involving voluntary organizations in such provisional forms of co-delivery does not circumvent the problem of dependance on aid because in most cases such involvement is initiated by TFPs (particularly via NGOs from the Global North) and achieved with their financial and technical support, sometimes even as "traveling models" (Baron, Siri, and Belbéoc'h 2022).

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6   Ostrom defines "coproduction of public services" as: "The process through which inputs to produce a good or a service are contributed by individuals who are not in the same organization" (Ostrom 1996, 1,073).

7   In Africa, the foundation of commons and the voluntary sector is essentially a stopgap and a response to state failings. However, as is often the case in Europe, collective management of problems to which the state, and the market, had been indifferent can sometimes be developed, e.g., matters related to the environment or healthcare.

8   This article analyzes waste management in six large cities in the Global South (two of which are African) that relies on informal collectors (sometimes organized into a quasi-union), municipalities, and resident associations.

However, in other fields numerous stopgap forms of co-delivery are not steered by aid. These forms are the product of local improvisation. Institutional representatives such as mayors, sponsors, funders, priests or imams, voluntary leaders, and chiefs all regularly intervene locally to try to ensure that, "in spite of everything," some public services can be delivered, albeit in a compromised or defective manner, with variable and fragile success. Most of the time, such co-delivery is highly dependent on individuals and their relationships. It is a case of do-it-yourself or improvisation. It remains ephemeral because it has not been institutionalized.

> The gendarmerie is frequently almost powerless to deal with local security problems in rural areas (road blockers, burglaries, and livestock theft) because its only vehicle has broken down or its annual petrol supply ran out in March. So, the district chief uses his "cavalry" (every district chief has a mounted guard paid for with his own money) to track the thieves. The village "hunting" association will make precautionary tours of the area. The mayor will pay for repair of the vehicle. A European Union project established in the neighborhood will lend a vehicle. A prominent business leader in the nearest village will purchase the petrol (see Abdoulkader and Adamou 2013).

4. Internal reformers as contextual experts

Can the bureaucratic mode of governance be left to its sad fate? Is increasing stopgap delivery, with or without commons, enough? The answer is clearly "no," especially given the major challenge of strengthening weak states in the current political context.

Two parties are officially involved in this issue and are supposed to find solutions: national governments on the one hand and international institutions on the other. National governments have thus far largely failed, despite a few patchy efforts and a handful of reformist ministers here and there.

Funders, meanwhile, have tried to reform states and government bodies from the outside over and over again for fifty years. These reforms were usually inspired by New Public Management (for example, performance-based payment). However, such reforms, typical of "traveling models" (Olivier de Sardan 2021), keep coming up against something stronger than themselves: department habits, officials' practical norms, ministry inertia, and obstruction from those wanting to maintain the status quo and all those who profit from the current situation. In general, and with a few exceptions, these reforms gradually fall apart or are bypassed, hijacked, and sometimes silently boycotted. However, it should hardly be surprising that reforms applied from the outside do not achieve very much.

Given this twin failure, are there no other options that, without being classified as actual commons, could share an affinity with them insofar as they would be based on a "bottom-up movement" and local innovations to improve the delivery of public goods and services, but from within those public services themselves? The answer this time is "yes" and that is what we are going to address briefly.

Any true reform of public services benefiting users requires fundamental reform of state public services, but it cannot happen without local innovators working within the government bodies and agencies themselves. This is not to deny the value of stopgap co-delivery or the galvanizing role of the voluntary sector and its potential commons. Even less is it to deny the need for reformist alliances between state officials and other citizens, be they organized into collectives or not. However, the presence of local reformist entrepreneurs and innovators performing different roles on the frontline of state public services delivery is essential, even crucial.

They do exist, although they are small in number and almost invisible. We have reached this common sense conclusion (albeit one that is regularly forgotten) after more than twenty years of research and, in particular, after encountering some admirable exceptions here and there. These "internal reformers" are state officials who usually work on the frontline of public services delivery, although they also sometimes have more senior roles. In contexts of destitution and often despite disapproving or resigned colleagues, they seek to make a particular service "work in spite of everything." They want to deliver better quality services. They try to cobble something together by experimenting with frugal innovations adapted to their professional circumstances, the department's "real world" (Niger, Benin, or Burkina), and the practical norms of civil servants. We sometimes call these people "contextual experts" (Olivier de Sardan 2022) because they have intimate knowledge about this "real word" and how public services operate on a day-to-day basis (a situation often far removed from official norms, protocols, and announcements). This knowledge is lacking among the international, and indeed sometimes national, experts who draw up public

policies. These contextual experts are often invisible or ignored, but they are essential resources for any new public policy, resources that, alas, are typically never called upon.

> Midwives at a maternity hospital were routinely late for work. As is the case in many places, they were arriving at nine o'clock instead of seven thirty when their shift officially started. As a consequence, the director of the hospital no longer even ensured that the sign-in sheets—distributed by the ministry in an attempt to end this practice—were completed. She knew that it was pointless because the midwives all provided a fictitious time. Instead, she herself started to arrive at eight o'clock, even though directors usually arrive nine thirty after their staff as a demonstration of their seniority. She would then visit all the hospital wards to "greet" her midwives. They would subsequently make an effort to be present from eight o'clock because it would be "shameful" to be absent when the director comes to greet you (Souley Issoufou 2015).

> LASDEL has identified approximately fifty reformers like this director in the field of maternal and infant healthcare in Niger and has documented their respective innovations. Typically, these contextual experts are isolated and undervalued by their hierarchy. The aim of our action research, which began three years ago, was to facilitate a network for them, publicize their experiences, and ensure that their specific expertise is recognized by the authorities.

Contextual experts who seek to improve the quality of public services obviously have everything to gain from creating synergies and "enrolling" (Callon 1986) support by collaborating with users (user associations or management committees) and municipalities. Perhaps they might also work with certain "traditional" chiefs, priests, imams, sponsors, project leaders, and private operators who also want to find stopgap solutions to the shortcomings (and even sometimes the collapse) of public services that would be favorable to users.

In other words, we believe that no mode of governance is a miracle solution (and the associational one no more so than any other) and nothing should be completely ruled out. All these forms of governance include people who want to bring about social reform. They all have "champions" of the common good who are capable of initiating greater cooperation between stakeholders to better deliver public services, particularly those that are in a pitiful state currently. However, impediments, obstacles, and traps also lie within them all. They all contain individuals who favor the status quo and who are instinctively hostile to what is in the public interest.

The advantage of a pro-reform alliance involving all the different modes of governance is that it could go beyond simple stopgap solutions and focus on fundamental reform of public services for the greater good. This kind of reform remains a political priority in Africa today and should involve state contextual experts and commons actors, as well as mayors and any societal stakeholders wanting to play a role. However, I realize that I am now stepping outside my area of expertise as a researcher and speaking more as a concerned citizen.

Conclusion

How do the proposals above resonate with what might be called "the commons perspective," knowing that the latter is not monolithic (Cornu, Orsi, and Rochfeld 2021), operates on two levels — scientific (not prescriptive) and ideological (citizen preferences)[9]— and encompasses layers of reality or "reference realities" (Olivier de Sardan 2015) that exist on very different scales?[10]

These internal differences and inconsistencies within the overall commons perspective can be reconciled through the four considerations set out below. Each one ends with a question to which I do not have the answer and should therefore stimulate discussion.

1) The notion of the greater good lies at the heart of the commons perspective because it means satisfying the fundamental needs of citizens that cannot simply be delegated to (or complacently conferred upon) governments (the state) or the market (multinationals). It implies collective and collaborative initiatives. We have demonstrated that many different institutions (modes of governance) deliver public goods in Africa at the local level. Moreover, in reaction to the shortcomings of the bureaucratic mode of governance, stopgap co-delivery is gradually being established, although in most cases it is not in the typical form of commons. *Can the commons perspective be expanded to include this kind of stopgap delivery of public goods, even if it does not take the "typical" commons form?*

2) From the commons perspective, the voluntary sector in its broadest sense (both formal and informal) is the preferred home of collective citizen action founded on shared goals with collectively agreed rules and a focus on innovation. However, in Africa the development of such action comes up against the dependance on external aid. This significantly limits the ability of associations to act autonomously, including those that might be categorized as commons. This does not prevent the development of endogenous associative dynamics altogether, but it does make it the exception. *How can the commons perspective distinguish between "artificial commons" and "real commons" within the voluntary sector?* Insofar as the associational mode of governance also encompasses practical norms alongside official ones, *can the commons perspective be expanded to include practical norms within "commons" (that cannot avoid discrepancies between official rules and actual practices)?*

3) The commons perspective shows barely any interest in how the state itself functions (the bureaucratic mode of governance). It is not perceived as a place for "bottom-up innovation." That is considered the prerogative of the voluntary sector and commons. Consequently, they are seen as being an external lever for any reform of public services. However, in Africa (re)constructing public services is essential and will also require action within government bodies and initiatives from state officials themselves. *Can the commons perspective welcome state officials who are innovating on the ground?*

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9   Two relatively different perspectives confront citizen-based promotion of commons: On the one hand, the "realist" perspective presented in the book *Commons, Drivers of Change and Opportunities for Africa* (Leyronas and Coriat, forthcoming) that argues for positive interaction between commons, the state, and the market; and on the other hand, the "radical" perspective where commons are proposed as a clear alternative to the state and the market (Dardot and Laval 2014).

10   Between the micro-level of CPRs and the macro-level of "global public goods."

4) Any reform of public services in Africa involves collaboration between reformist state officials and pro-reform stakeholders from other modes of governance, particularly the voluntary sector (including various forms of commons) and municipalities. *Is the commons perspective able to encourage such collaboration and how?*

Let us conclude with the long-term challenge facing any research on commons, any research on the delivery of public goods, and even any research on development. It is a challenge more apposite in Africa than anywhere else. The scope and effectiveness of a development program, a public policy, community action, public service reform, collective action, citizen engagement, a network of contextual experts, and a sustainable form of commons can only be assessed over the medium- and long-term. Appraisers and researchers often work in the immediate present, even the past. They are rarely in a position to carry out continued follow up beyond the usual, ridiculously short timeframes of the programs that fund them.

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