

Local conventions pave way to community-based conflict prevention in Niger

TerresEauVie, Niger



Members of the grazing area users' management committee proudly show how they manage to delimit livestock corridor with natural hedges to protect access to the pasture and water for livestock. Photo: TerresEauVie, January 2022

In West Africa, farmers and herders have been in competition for centuries. But violence involving pastoralists in West and Central Africa – as perpetrators and victims – has increased in recent years. Since 2010, there have been more than 15,000 deaths related to farmer-herder violence. Half of them have occurred since 2018¹.

In Niger, agriculture and livestock occupy more than 80% of the population, giving way to pervasive tension. The main trigger of conflicts is the damage caused to cultivated fields when herders graze and water their livestock or move to other regions to find suitable grazing lands. Herders have seen their grazing areas, essential to feed their livestock, gradually disappear leaving fewer and fewer pathways to pasture and water points. Agricultural cultivation has encroached on these vital corridors, complicating how farmers can safely feed and move their livestock.

Desertification and demographic pressure have forced farmers to encroach on these livestock corridors and grazing areas in search of more arable land. Conflicts also happen when one party does not abide by the mutually beneficial field occupation period. Indeed, there is a legally recognized right when livestock can enter farmer fields to feed on crop residues after harvest. Then, herders have to move their livestock before the seeding periods. The fields benefit from this arrangement because animal manure enriches the soil. However, farmers now often do not harvest soon enough for herders - because of climate change, the seeding is starting later. And herders cannot wait for all the crops to be harvested. The fact is that natural pasture and animal feed are diminishing.

For all these reasons, they find themselves competing to use natural resources. Each group has its reasons,

each defends its interests, and conflicts appear. Dialogue is difficult, if not non-existent.

To address these recurring issues, the USAID TerresEauVie Activity, under the RISE II Initiative, joined forces with USAID-funded Wadata and Girma Activities to develop Local Conventions (LCs) as a sustainable way for communities to tackle the problem, make decisions on how to protect these critical natural resources, and effectively prevent conflict. In Mazamni commune, in the Zinder region, TerresEauVie and Wadata facilitated the implementation of 4 LCs. Three of them will help to better manage pastoral areas connected to ponds through livestock corridors and the fourth will promote the practice of assisted natural regeneration and the cessation of cutting down the trees. These conventions are in line with national legislation, while respecting traditional provisions to facilitate the movement and feeding needs of livestock and to intervene in cases of damage to crops before serious disputes arise.

TerresEauVie and its partners have thus provided the technical expertise to create a consensus between the users of one or more shared resources, formalized by the authorities (local, departmental, regional) to sustainably manage natural resources and prevent conflicts. These local conventions work because community leaders coordinate efforts between traditional, religious and civil society actors. The involvement of administrative authorities empowers communities to better manage these spaces and reduce encroachment on land use as well as resource misuse. The community itself diagnoses and maps out the

¹ <http://www.acleddata.com> and Event Data project (ACLED).

problems encountered. Based on this birds'-eye view, they define rules, before applying them themselves.

One of the LCs signed in Mazamni concerns the 460-hectare Kouyikam grazing area, which is used daily by more than 500 animals (cows, sheep and goats) to graze and drink. Herders from 14 surrounding villages (with a total population of 3,400) regularly complained that farmers encroached on this area. Several times a year, authorities had to intervene to solve conflicts. The recently signed local convention has already enabled communities to renew dialogue and prevent these conflicts in the long term.

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Mai Magagi, village chief of Kouyikam, Mazamni

Mai Magagi, the village chief of Kouyikam who became the president of the users' management committee of the grazing area put in place through the local convention explained how this LC brought about major changes: "The meetings to make the diagnosis with the administrative and customary authorities, as well the different layers of the community and the technical services allowed us to express and share our concerns around the grazing area. This was like an eye-opener for me about the degradation of our environment and natural resources. The population of our area has increased sharply. We can no longer graze our animals quietly like our parents. In our villages, almost everybody owns animals. So, the narrowed or cut livestock corridors bother the whole population. Thanks to the local convention, we set up a committee of users of the resource to enforce the management rules that we fixed. Our committee has already taken several strong initiatives. For example, thanks to negotiations between herders and farmers, we managed to reopen corridors that were obstructed, and we were able to delimit 15 kilometers of corridors

with our own means, physically with hedges. Now, everyone can see and respect the limits. Along 5 kilometers, we even managed to widen the corridor to 7 meters. This is very important. Now the animals can go peacefully to drink at the pond of Atchi that is part of the grazing area. We were able to share and understand all the decisions taken in the local convention, by communicating on the community radio called Koutoukoum. This is crucial to our success. Everyone needs to feel involved."

During one of the meetings to validate the LCs at city hall, a resident of the area covered by the LC said that they had to wait for the projects to help the community in implementing the documents. The village chief immediately stood up and spoke: "We don't need to wait for someone's help. These natural resources are for us. It is up to us to manage them and enforce the provisions of the LC. We can lead our own way out of farmers-herders conflicts." This local, community leadership and ownership is necessary to convince other actors to rely on local conventions to act, without external help. And the community quickly saw the impact of these LCs. "This year, local authorities only had to deal with 5 conflicts, whereas in previous years, we had on average 11 disputes. We expect this number to drop further," says Mr. Harou Zoudaleini, the Regional Permanent Secretary of the Rural Code (the institution in charge of natural resources and land management in Niger).

Thanks to local conventions, communities are invested with the role of protecting natural resources and preventing conflicts between farmers and herders. They are developing their own long-term solutions so that herders can continue to graze and water their animals, while allowing farmers to farm on land without worrying about damage to their crops. The communities are more united, empowering themselves to manage their natural resources and conflicts and continuing an open dialogue. In a region heavily impacted by climate change and natural shocks like droughts, and under constant threat of insecurity, establishing clear ways for communities to peacefully communicate, sustainably manage their resources, and solve conflict is more important than ever.