

Gerti Hesseling

## CHILDREN AS SOCIAL SECURITY IN AFRICA?<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

When I was invited to introduce the subject: "Social (in)security and poverty as world issues" with reference to Africa, it was not difficult for me to think up a working title. Ask the old men and the old women of the Sahel, sitting in the shade of the baobab tree, what they believe constitutes their wealth, and they will often tell you: "To get rich, we need many children who can help us in the fields, and who can care for us later when we can no longer work in the fields ourselves." In the collection of interviews entitled *At the desert's edge; oral histories from the Sahel*<sup>2</sup> Fatimata (62) from Burkina Faso says: "I prefer a large family. If some children die, there are still some left to help you when you are old." In academic publications too, African kinship relations and principles of solidarity are often cited as an example of a typically African system of social security.<sup>3</sup> But although "Children as Social Security in Africa" is a convenient, arresting title, when considered in relation to the Sahel in 1994 it should really be phrased as a question. To begin with, it is too limited a point of departure. Furthermore, having lots of children actually leads, indirectly, to social insecurity.

I would like to construct my address around three themes. The first theme is the relationship between natural resources and social security in the Sahel. I shall focus on the fact that, through an interplay of many factors and actors, the natural process of regeneration following calamities such as periodic drought is no longer sufficient to re-establish the ecological balance. We can therefore speak of a process of degeneration of the factors

and actors connected to the ecosystem. This leads to the depletion of increasingly scarce natural resources and to escalating competition for their use.

The national governments of the Sahel and development aid organisations have in general reacted with short-term solutions and by attacking symptoms. And this brings me to the second theme. We are forced to acknowledge that after 30 years of development aid, the environment in the Sahel is continuing to degenerate at the same rate. That is why development aid is increasingly called a bottomless pit. Is this verdict correct, and if so, why?

On the basis of these first two themes, I shall try to provide a partial analysis of the changes in the Sahel that have led to the current situation. And I will conclude by suggesting possible solutions. The new buzz-word in the Sahel is decentralisation, and this is taken to include the decentralised management of natural resources.

- Why? Can decentralisation in any way help stop the process of environmental degradation so that the exploitation of land, forests and water will be sufficiently productive for present and future generations of users?
- If so, how can this be done, and above all:
- Under what conditions?

### Natural resources and social security in the Sahel

Let's begin with a number of observations.

- Presently the majority of the inhabitants of the Sahel are still living in rural areas, and this rural population has to provide food (grains and meat)

<sup>1</sup> With thanks to Teun Pelsler for his constructive comments in the writing of this report Dakar, 3 March 1994

<sup>2</sup> London Panos Publications [1991]

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, T Locoh, "Les familles africaines face a la crise", *Afrique contemporaine*, 2, no 166, 1993 3-13

and firewood (for preparing the food) both for its own needs and for those of the urban population.<sup>4</sup>

- Experts - soil scientists, agricultural scientists and foresters - all agree that the ecological balance in the Sahel has always been extremely fragile.
- The Sahel has always suffered long periods of drought and other natural disasters.

In the book *At the desert's edge*, to which I have referred above, many old women and men recount the rainless years of their youth, periods that were followed by plagues of locusts that devoured their crops in an instant. In Burkina Faso, each natural calamity even had its own name, in the manner of hurricanes.

'Many of the significant events in our life have been marked by famine. The famine of Naba Koabga was one of the most important (...) 30 years after the famine of Naba Koabga was the famine of Piiss'Wai (literally 90), which was exactly 51 years ago. Between these two great famines was the famine of Suya, which means grasshoppers.' [1991: 119].

Those were years of starvation on a diet of leaves and wild nuts and berries, years of sickness and death, and of death among the cattle. We can refer to this as periodic degeneration. But after this would come periods of regular rainfall, of plentiful harvests and of recovery of the livestock. In other words, the ecological balance was gradually restored without external intervention, and the population could once again live off the fruits of the land, hunting, and the milk from passing cattle. The environment thus possessed an ability to regenerate.

In recent years, the Sahel has experienced another two periods of drought in swift succession: one in the early 1970s and another in 1984-1985. The media publicised the Sahel as a region of

emaciated infants and cows too weak to stay on their feet. But now, ten years after the last drought, not only has the ecological balance still not recovered, but the environment is rapidly deteriorating. What's more, ecologists speak of impending doom, in that some areas have almost reached the point of no return.

What has happened? I shall not attempt to give an exhaustive account of every single cause but, without going into too much detail, I should like to dwell on some of the contributing actors and factors. Firstly, between 1960 and 1990 the population increased sharply<sup>5</sup>: population growth has now reached an annual average of 3% as against an approximate 2.5% in the 1960s. By and large this is the result of a marked decrease in mortality rates owing to better health provisions, information campaigns and so forth. Naturally, this is something we can only delight in, and even take a little pride in, because of the role played by our development aid. But birth rates during this same period barely decreased.<sup>6</sup>

Not only has the human population dramatically increased in number; cattle are also far more numerous. This is partly due to vaccination campaigns, but there is more to it. The possession of livestock has always been an important manifestation of social status, and so it remains today. What's more, livestock has become increasingly important as a meat supply for the steadily growing urban population, for fertilizing agricultural land, and for traction. And finally - and perhaps this is the most significant factor - livestock has now become a substantial nest egg for rich traders and public servants. And as long as bank deposits yield less return than investments in livestock, we will see the Peuls and Bororos, who used to be the principal nomadic cattle breeders in the

<sup>4</sup> Between 1960 and 1990 the urban population increased more than sixfold in absolute terms (from 28 to 183 million) Expressed as a percentage the growth rate has risen from 14% to 38% See *Afrique contemporaine* 1992: 29

<sup>5</sup> Between 1950 and 1980 the population trebled; see *Afrique contemporaine*, 1992/4: 10, 27.

<sup>6</sup> On average 48.30 per thousand; see *Afrique contemporaine*, 1992/4: 26.

Sahel, being employed by city-dwellers as herdsmen.

The enormous growth of both the population and livestock has increased pressure on natural resources to such an extent that saturation point has now been reached almost everywhere. And of course this leads to increasingly keen competition to procure these ever scarcer resources and to an escalation of violent conflicts among crop-farmers, between crop-farmers and livestock producers, between immigrants and the established population, and even between different countries. Deterioration of the natural environment thus also leads to disintegration of social and political structures.

A second cause underlying the environment's diminishing resilience to natural calamities certainly relates to the development intervention of the 1960s, which focused chiefly on modern large-scale agricultural projects. One example of this is peanut production in Senegal: in the 1960s, premiums were awarded for each hectare of land cleared of trees and shrubs so that the soil could be better cultivated to improve the peanut yield.

These large-scale agricultural projects did not result in the desired green revolution, but often in deforestation, forced migration and therefore, once again, in environmental degradation and a disintegration of social structures.

Finally - not that I have covered all the relevant issues, but because limited space necessitates making a choice - the 1970s saw an economic world crisis in which world prices for agricultural products collapsed. Farmers received less for their cash crops and therefore extended their farmland to ensure a sufficient income.

Now that we have reviewed these factors of dramatic influence on the environment, we can conclude that the production potential of the ecological order as it now stands is no longer sufficient to feed the population of the Sahel. This has meant a decrease in social security for the

inhabitants, and all the problems this entails.

### **Development aid: a bottomless pit?**

After thirty years of development aid amounting to billions of guilders, the Sahel has reached a critical point. It seems legitimate to ask whether these billions of guilders have not simply been thrown into a bottomless pit. If there is any truth at all to this, how can we explain it, and what should be done to turn the tide?

Broadly speaking, charitable donations are often generated by exploiting the visual impact of the symptoms of poverty (the walking skeletons of the Sahel), after which the money is spent on treating these symptoms. At neither stage, in general, is there an in-depth analysis of the problems. Through the obfuscating effects of treating symptoms, it is becoming increasingly difficult to identify the deeper causes behind this process of degeneration.

I believe that the strongly project-oriented bias of development aid is largely to blame for the failure to tackle the real causes of the degeneration process.

Anybody who has had anything to do with project aid knows how it works. An identification mission turns up and, after a few weeks of discussions and field visits, establishes the causes of the problem, which are in reality symptoms of the problem, and by dashing headlong into the treatment of symptoms it reinforces the bottomless pit theory. For instance, the mission observes that a certain area has too few trees, which is aggravating soil erosion and causing fuel shortages. The land is therefore less fertile and the women have to walk further and further to collect firewood, and even there the vegetation is becoming increasingly scarce. The mission draws up a substantial project report describing these observations at length, complete with short and long term objectives and a budget. Next a reforestation project gets off the ground and 10 million dollars, say, are invested in the planting of eucalyptus trees. After a while an evaluation mission comes along; they see the eucalyptus trees planted along

the track and confirm that the objectives have been reached. Years later it turns out that there is little left of the wood through lack of upkeep, and the whole process has to be started anew.

Combined with the existing pressure to spend that is felt by many donors, this process of treating symptoms leads to absurd situations: Right now Burkina Faso would appear to have enough chemical fertiliser to last for the next four years...! In the meantime those working on projects almost everywhere have moved on to an integrated approach, but unfortunately it has to be admitted that these integrated projects are poorly coordinated. This is particularly true of projects funded by several donors, each of whom has his own particular "kingdom" to protect.

I am painting a somewhat ironic picture of this process, and I am fully aware that in doing so I risk trivialising the work of many serious development workers. But by portraying events in this rather schematic and provocative way, I wish to show that a policy of treating symptoms leads in the first instance to a search for short term solutions. Questions relating to the real causes of the tree shortage (or of the poor grain yield, or of the depleting pasture lands) are avoided. For instance, we know that rapid population growth is one of the underlying causes. This can only be seriously tackled by a rigorous policy of population control. And - as is widely known - the potential for this is severely limited by deep-rooted ideological, religious, cultural and ethical barriers. I will not dwell on the subject of population control. After many conversations with experts on this topic, and after heated discussions with men, women and children from numerous villages and cities in the Sahel, I realise that there are no simple, ready-made solutions to the population problem, and that only after a long and arduous process will birth control become a reality. Let me conclude this topic by referring you to a publication produced by the United Nation's Population Fund in 1991, entitled: "Population, Resources and the

Environment. The Critical Challenges". So we will have to look for other ways of halting the process of ecological degeneration and social disintegration. Over the last 30 years, many development models and new paradigms have been devised. I will not discuss their merits here, especially since most of them are centred on economics, and as a non-economist, I would be on slippery ground. But the last few years have seen the emergence of a new trend that is very popular with the World Bank and IMF as well as with bilateral and multilateral donors, and national governments in the Sahel (and in all developing countries): namely, decentralisation. This is a subject on which I do feel qualified to comment, as a lawyer with a particular interest in institutional and legal conditions for the decentralised administration of natural resources in the Sahel.

#### **Decentralisation: why, how, and under what conditions**

At the risk of seeming pedantic, I should like to begin with a few definitions, so as to preclude misunderstanding.

Decentralisation is defined in the textbooks as the transfer of regulatory and executive competence to local authorities, without central government retaining a supervisory role. I prefer to distinguish between two complementary tracks of decentralisation:

- the creation of conditions that enable local communities to manage their own resources; and
- administrative reforms whereby central powers are transferred to local governments.

The present proposals for decentralisation in the Sahel are mainly confined to administrative reforms. Moreover, decentralisation is often confused with devolution: the transfer of limited powers to local or regional bodies (mainly government agencies), powers which may only be exercised under the supervision of the central authority.

Quantitative indicators, and qualitative ones even more so, can be used to show

that African countries are all firmly centralist, even by comparison with the most centralist of Western countries, such as France. The most significant consequence of having a centralist state is that the opportunities for local communities to create their own forms of organisation and to engage in collective action are limited, and that legislative and executive power is concentrated in the hands of just one or a small number of people. In a study conducted in 1990, *The failure of the centralized State*<sup>7</sup>, it was convincingly demonstrated that this severely hampers economic development. Even in countries such as Senegal, which practises a cautious form of decentralised administration, the results in terms of economic development and more sustainable management of non-renewable resources are disappointing. This is mainly because decentralisation is actually aimed at expanding existing state structures at local level. The drawback is that local institutions do not have sufficient autonomy, their policies can still be unilaterally rejected by the government, and they are accountable to central government rather than to the local population. It may be added that donors themselves have reinforced the centralist policy in the countries of the Sahel to a certain extent by tending to use existing state structures - often through laziness - as a channel for development funds. For these reasons there is now a recognized need for real decentralisation, and even for self governance, which goes a step further. What does this involve? I quote the authors of *The failure of the centralized state*, to which I have already referred:

'(Self-governance is) a policy where the people are able to seek and develop partnerships with one another in the development process; where they can fulfil their potential for self-organization at multiple levels on which they hold the legal rights and diverse resources to engage in collective action.

Under a regime of self-governance, the state's primary role is to act as a framework of rules which empowers and facilitates the people, encouraging relations of mutual respect and cooperation among them and abating opportunities for predation and exploitation. Under this regime they can organise, learn, and act with one another to construct the more complex social, economic and political relationships which are necessary for development to occur. The state's role is 'to set the stage' rather than 'write the script'" (1990: 14-15).

Applied to the management of natural resources, decentralisation implies that certain guidelines are formulated at national level e.g. in a legislative framework and that a national policy plan is then set out and implemented at regional and local level, which can be specially adapted and fleshed out according to local circumstances. Scrutiny of such local regulations should in the first instance be carried out at local level. Let me illustrate this with a concrete example. At the beginning of the dry season in the Sahel, vegetation is often burnt (the *feux de brousse*). This practice was long prohibited in the countries of the Sahel, and this has led to evasive action, the bribing of forest wardens and uncontrollable forest fires. Then at some point it was realised that under some circumstances burning can have a favourable effect. For instance, livestock breeders set fire to the dry grass during the dry season, allowing new shoots to sprout so that their livestock can graze once more. Cotton plant growers, too, set fire to stubble after the harvest in order to destroy the eggs of parasites. Therefore a general prohibition of *feux de brousse* throughout the country makes no sense. In a few countries of the Sahel, national legislation has now been amended to allow the practice of *feux de brousse* under certain circumstances. This makes it possible for

<sup>7</sup> J W Wunsch & D Olowu (eds), Boulder Westview Press

provisions to be drawn up at regional and local level which authorise the burning of vegetation during certain periods.

With decentralisation it is hoped that a policy can be created at local level that is aimed at re-establishing nature's regenerative potential by exploiting the available local knowledge.

The next question is how and under what circumstances one can ensure that such a local policy will have the desired effect.

There is no ready-made blueprint at hand, and what follows is merely an attempt to devise a model that could serve as a basis for initiating a process of decentralised management of natural resources.

A three-track policy is a good starting-point. First of all, those who are entrusted at local level with formulating and implementing a policy for natural resources must attend a thorough, multifaceted course of training. Besides having a broad area of expertise, they should know how to disseminate information as well as being able to provide a permanent analysis of the available local knowledge and of the local social, economic and political processes. Next, possibilities should be created for continuous in-service training. Lastly it is essential that these local, versatile "environmental experts" are remunerated generously, not only to increase the appeal of their post (and to reduce the lure of the city), but also because it would make them less susceptible to bribery and manipulation within the patronage networks that play such an important role in Africa.

The second track of this policy is oriented towards the local population, from which a council of "sages" could be formed, to serve as a sort of parliament next to the local "environmental experts". Discussions are still in progress about how to form this parliament or local forum (whether members should be elected or appointed, and what criteria should apply) and about the geographical unit within which it would function (one or several villages, a *commune rurale*, province etc.). But

whatever the outcome, a continuous flow of information and opportunities for training will have to be created, that will help them identify and formulate the priorities of the population (as a result of which they could make a real contribution to the drafting of policy plans) and subject policy implementation to critical scrutiny. Participation and accountability are necessary prerequisites to this strategy.

Finally, the third track is targeted at the national level: it calls for specialists who are available on demand and who can moreover act as thermometers; in other words it calls for specialists who can play an ongoing evaluation role in their field. I must stress that I am merely suggesting a possible framework and not a concrete form of decentralisation that has been tried and tested in part of the Sahel. At the moment throughout the Sahel - especially in Burkina Faso, Mali and Senegal - people are still in the planning and experimental phase. One of the options that these countries are experimenting with, aside from administrative decentralisation, is the contractual approach, i.e. the 'public-private partnership'; here the government and local communities enter into a contract for the management of, say, a forest.

If one really wants to arrive at some sort of sustainable local environmental policy, then it is not sufficient to create new laws and structures; there also has to be - perhaps more than anything else - a change of mentality both within the local population and within the government. Thirty years of development aid and failed state intervention have engendered in the public a passive and rather helpless, insecure mentality. At the same time their suspicion of anything that has to do with the government has greatly intensified. Therefore, their faith in their own abilities as well as in those of the government has to be rebuilt. A change of mentality is also called for in the first instance at the governmental level, and that cannot be enforced by means of administrative laws alone. Public servants will have to

refashion what is often a paternalistic - and occasionally repressive - role into one that is more advisory and supportive. To put it into modern jargon, they will have to become the local representatives of the "enabling state".

There is far more that could be said about the forms of decentralisation, and the necessary conditions, but given the limited space, I wish to go on here to formulate some general conclusions.

### Conclusion

Is decentralisation the one and only answer to the process of environmental degeneration and to the process of disintegration of social and political relations in the Sahel? Of course not.

Although expectations of decentralisation are extremely high, its dangers and pitfalls are often grossly underestimated.

The expectations of decentralisation can be summarised as follows. It will lead to:

- a better and, above all, better motivated participation of the local population in local development policy, and therefore in development projects;
- a better, more efficient and goal-oriented management of natural resources and public services; and therefore:
- a more sustainable development and improved social security for the population of the Sahel.

As already noted, decentralisation also has its pitfalls. Let me enumerate three of these.

1. Decentralisation threatens to become the new mascot of the international donor community. The various donors - the World Bank, USAID, France, Switzerland, just to name a few - are all scrambling to outdo one another. External powers occasionally come close to infringing upon the spheres of influence of what are in principle sovereign states.<sup>8</sup> As a result of this external pressure, the Sahel nations are in danger of accepting decentralisation

in theory, but of doing little to flesh it out in practice. The tradition of centralist policies is deeply rooted and there is much fear of ethnic regionalisation.

2. Another danger is that the policy of decentralisation may be introduced too rapidly. If this were to happen we would once again run the risk of treating symptoms alone, and overlooking complex processes, at national and local level, which could either strengthen or weaken the process of decentralisation. I am referring here, for instance, to the necessary technological solutions which could contribute to a recovery of the ecological balance. On a completely different level, there is also the problem of how to strengthen democracy at grass roots level, and the risk of decentralisation actually reinforcing existing patronage relations, for instance, or hierarchical social structures.
3. Finally, decentralisation is being emphasised in a period of structural adjustment programmes, which are compelling the Sahel countries to curb government spending drastically. As long as the national governments have not really formulated a social policy of their own, there is a danger that decentralisation will be used first and foremost as an excuse to offload the costs of such policies (food supply, education, health) onto the local population who simply haven't the means to cope with them.

The already fragile social services in the Sahel are being dismantled still further and, under the guise of decentralisation, they are being privatised and decontrolled. In the present social context of the Sahel, this means that African kinship relations and solidarity principles are once again being heavily relied upon for basic social services. And that takes us back to square one.

<sup>8</sup> See M. Doornbos, 1993, "Staatsvorming onder toezicht: de zorg om 'good governance'", in *Antropologische verkenningen*, 12,4 32-41

Decentralisation can only contribute to the regenerative potential of the ecological system, and therefore to an improvement of social security in the Sahel, once we are prepared to take a long-term view of the problem, and when this process has been properly integrated into the complex of technical, social and political processes of renewal that are emerging in the region. Only then can we rephrase the title of this address and actually begin to create social security for children in the Sahel.

I am well aware that I have only dealt with a limited aspect of the very broad theme "social (in)security and poverty in Africa as world issues". I have focused on the Sahel, the only region in Africa that I have any personal experience of, with particular reference to the rural population.

Moreover I have tried to confine myself, as far as possible, to my own particular field.

I should like to end by formulating two provocative statements:

1. Development aid will remain a bottomless pit as long as it is targeted at the treatment of symptoms and as long as insufficient money and time is spent on analysing the complex of factors and actors that can lead to positive regeneration or negative degeneration of the environment.
2. Decentralisation can only contribute to a recovery of the environment's regenerative potential and to improved social security if at the same time conditions are being created that promote the best possible use of local knowledge and local initiatives.

#### **Biographical note**

Gerti Hesseling is member of the staff of the Africa Studies Centre, University of Leiden, The Netherlands. She has done research on rural and urban land tenure in Senegal and Cameroon. Since 1990 she has been a consultant to the *Club du Sahel* in Paris. Some of her most recent publications are *La foresterie rurale au Sénégal. Participation villageoise et gestion locale*, Leiden: Leiden Development Studies No.12, 1993 (co-edited with J. van der Breemer and R.R. Bergh); "Legal and institutional conditions for local management of natural resources: Mali", in R.J. Bakema (ed.) *Land Tenure and Sustainable Land Use*, Amsterdam: Royal Tropical Institute, Bulletin 332, 1994, pp. 31-47; *Land Tenure and Natural Resources Management in the Sahel*, Paris/Ouagadougou: Club du Sahel/CILSS, 1994 (co-edited with B.M. Ba).