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Bridging the gap between bird conservation and sustainable development : perceptions and participation of rural people in Burkina Faso's Sahel region

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Summary

This research focuses on the socio-cultural, socio-economic and institutional aspects of conservation projects in Burkina Faso, predominantly including two of Burkina Faso's three Local Conservation Groups (LCGs), namely the Sourou LCG and the Higa LCG. For comparison purposes, and to place the Living on the Edge project of the global non-governmental organization 'Birdlife International' in a broader context, similar interventions were also studied. In addition, the local population and the development actors active in the two LCG areas were also included in the study, as well as development actors with similar activities in other areas in the country. Furthermore, ecological aspects, including changes in land use and land cover, and their (potential) impact on African-Palearctic (A-P) migrant birds are also discussed. It connects this with integrated conservation and development concepts.

The main objectives of this study are to uncover the local values of birds, the environment and conservation for rural people in the Sahel, and to increase insights into interventions that aim to achieve integrated (migrant bird) conservation and sustainable development objectives in this area. It covers a region that is underrepresented in existing publications and highlights several thematic areas that warrant further research and debate. By focusing on issues like local perceptions, local institutional arrangements and the role of birds, this study adds new insights to the existing literature and knowledge. The links between conservation and livelihood concerns remain much debated, and there is no agreement about the degree to which these concerns are linked, and how they should be tackled together. In addition, to design sustainable (bird) conservation and land management strategies, it is vital to determine the symptoms and causes of environmental degradation through both scientific data and literature, as well as through local perceptions. Hence, the study's main research question is as follows:

How can (migrant) bird conservation and local sustainable development objectives be successfully integrated and implemented in Burkina Faso's Sahel region?

A broad range of research methods and sources were used for this study, including written sources, remote sensing data, interviews, observations, and workshops. This provided a great diversity of information that allowed a more holistic view of the many interrelated researched topics. Yet, field research was the study's fundamental data source, in particular interviews with the local population, as their perception on the research topics is the focus of this study. Further-

more, development actors were also an important study group because of their integrated (bird) conservation and sustainable development efforts.

It has been observed that farmers in the Sahel have improved their land management since the Sahel droughts of the 1970s and 1980s, and many reforestation initiatives have emerged, including in the research areas. This, together with increased rainfall and large-scale reforestation efforts, has led to the greening of large areas in Burkina Faso and neighbouring countries. Although a general greening of the Sahel is noted following increased rains and improved land use in recent decades, the exact causes of the greening are diverse and not always well-understood. Furthermore, environmental degradation is also (locally) detected, and human-induced environmental degradation is (still) threatening the survival of both birds and people, while droughts remain an ever-present threat. Recent studies have started to uncover the (severity of the) impacts of environmental degradation in the Sahel on A-P migrant birds.

Birds, including those that migrate, are typically valued by the studied local population in many (socio-cultural and socio-economic) ways, and play numerous positive roles in people's lives, sometimes directly related to their livelihoods. Bird species present an excellent indicator of environmental health and conservation issues, as is often also indicated by the inhabitants themselves, and therefore present a focus when it comes to conserving ecosystems, critical habitats and key issues. Many of these conservation issues are of global value and/or concern and many are also strongly linked with local livelihoods, including those in the Sahel and the research areas. In fact, this study shows that addressing many of the threats faced by (A-P migrant) birds will also positively impact the livelihood of the local population. Birds can therefore provide an ecological base in Sahelian conservation interventions that are of local and global concern to people. Indeed, this study highlights how poor, rural people are mindful of the crucial relationship between their livelihoods and the natural environment, and that the inhabitants demonstrate a positive attitude towards (bird) conservation, provided that their own livelihoods are not threatened (they are often negative towards seed-eating birds, that threaten their harvests). It is of prime importance that any conservation effort should address such issues. I conclude therefore that A-P migrant bird conservation should, and can, work hand in hand with livelihood improvement and sustainable development objectives in the Sahel.

This study shows that retaining and/or increasing the number of trees (in fields) is in fact the most evident way to achieve both (migrant bird) conservation and sustainable development objectives. Trees have a perceived crucial link with local livelihoods and affect, for example, flooding levels and soil degradation, and are especially valued for their wood. Trees play an essential role in the perceptions that the local inhabitants and authorities have of the environment and

conservation, especially regarding birds. For many A-P migrant birds, a healthy amount of trees in rural landscapes is vital (and for many species perhaps the most important element). Trees thus form an important and locally recognized link between bird conservation and livelihood improvement, making it an excellent target for community-based conservation. Tree planting was also the only regular conservation-related activity of the community organisations (COs) studied, and was the only conservation-related activity executed by most of their members. However, trees are certainly not the only perceived link between birds, conservation and local livelihoods. Both birds and people benefit in general from a more sustainable land use, in which natural resources, such as natural vegetation, is partially retained. Indeed, it is recognized that the environment's supporting and provisioning services are important. Furthermore, many socio-cultural, including aesthetic, and socio-economic values of birds, exist among the local inhabitants.

Local participation is a key element in the conservation strategy for A-P migrant birds; not least because livelihood improvement and conservation goals can and should be integrated. Indeed, as most land is managed by local inhabitants for their subsistence livelihoods and A-P migrant land birds occur in the wider landscape, the participation of local inhabitants is needed for a more sustainable Sahelian landscape. Moreover, local participation should increase efficiency, contribute to equity and can be used to include objectives and priorities of communities, among other things, and is therefore frequently promoted by all actor groups in Burkina Faso. As argued in this study, local participation can improve local conservation attitudes.

Importantly, this study also shows that there are favourable conditions for local participation. These conditions include people's recognition of their own environmental impact, their (current) realization that something can be done about existing environmental problems, as well as people's recognition of the link between bird conservation and livelihood improvement aspects, such as the protection of trees. Furthermore, and significantly, people generally show a positive attitude towards conservation and local conservation incentives do exist. Also, environmentally-related human conflicts appear to be (at most) incidental, while land-related conflicts were also perceived as uncommon and many inhabitants thought they were non-existent. The relatively limited degree of conflicts and the notable lack of conflicts between the many different religious and ethnic groups present, appears to favour local collaborative participation.

However, local participation generally remains limited in the studied areas, even though local collaboration partnerships are common (especially with international government organizations). Different causes have been revealed, such as too close relationships between the local population and (conservation)

donor organizations and limited tangible benefits from their joint activities (despite the fact that activities often contribute to sustainable development). Furthermore, development actors did not cede enough power and control to the local population to promote participation, even though these were often elements of the organization's stated objectives. Thus, a rather top-down approach was used and local empowerment was not achieved. Indeed, inhabitants frequently rated local participation as (too) limited and wished to have more input. Indeed, this study provides a strong argument for the need to increase local participation. It demonstrates several ways to do so, including through a much needed better understanding of local needs, attitudes and aspirations.

A popular strategy for development agencies (DAs) to involve the local population is through COs (including LCGs), because they allow for many people (i.e. CO members) to be reached through collaboration with a limited selection of people (i.e. CO board members). However, COs do not represent the whole population. Moreover, this study highlights several shortcomings in the functioning of COs, such as limited capacity and an often strong dependence on DAs. Unfortunately, many COs have not (yet) lived up to the governmental and non-governmental organizations' expectations or reached their participation and empowerment objectives. Also, with the exception of LCGs, COs have few conservation-related activities. Those activities undertaken by LCGs tend to be carried out by only a few members, with the exception of tree planting. Several recommendations are therefore provided in this study, such as including other local collaboration structures, in addition to also investing in capacity building, increasing the number of activities with tangible and financial benefits, and promoting a long-term vision.

In fact, one of the key issues with most conservation activities, is that benefits are not felt in the short-term. Conservation action is therefore also a matter of long-term vision and investment. Indeed, an often recurring aspect in both environmental and bird conservation perceptions is the importance of raising awareness and education. The numerous socio-cultural values, including aesthetic values (particularly for birds), that existed among many local inhabitants could be used more widely to promote conservation incentives, in particular, elevating the sense of pride at receiving (A-P) migrant birds. Education and awareness-raising should address the importance of birds, the environment, and conservation, but should also cover hunting and environmental legislation, as many people were rather unfamiliar with them, and illegal hunting was regularly observed.

Lastly, the many profound differences between the two rural research areas (notably on the subjects of ecology, economy, institutions, and local perceptions), as well as the diverging ecological changes over time within both areas, have illustrated and highlighted that conservation strategies in the Sahel should

be heterogeneous and flexible; geographically and over time. Knowing the local context, including the area's specific environmental conditions, the occurrence of local events and the level of human development, acting accordingly is therefore essential. Because environmental, bird, and conservation values were often linked with people's livelihoods, understanding the characteristics of the local inhabitants is crucial, including livelihood activities, religion, LCG (board) membership, local authority, and age. In fact, inhabitants' perceptions, including their conservation incentives, were influenced by local context and individual characteristics. Incorporating these variables in intervention strategies can be done by designing them in collaboration with local populations. This goes beyond presenting different options of interventions to the local populations. It should include formal local participation in the project design. In other words, there should be participation with strong elements of co-management. Nonetheless, this study also demonstrates that some environmental issues are less local context- and people-specific and that some conservation goals are beneficial for many different people (i.e., in both rural research areas), including increasing the number of trees. Indeed, the challenge is to respond to specific local conditions, while also considering wider issues.