



## Civil Society and Decentralization

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**I**n January 1998 the Burkina Faso government submitted a legal bill to its parliament on decentralization. The purpose of this proposed law, titled "Orientation on Decentralization" (OD), is to provide the legal framework necessary for its application. While waiting for the bill's adoption, expected before June 1998, the people live with their own interpretation of decentralization. The entire process may take a long time.



### A Field Experiences

Benoît B. Ouoba is responsible for the Tin Tua Association. Founded in 1989, Tin Tua (which means "Let Us Develop" in the local language of "gulmancéma") has an ambitious program to fight illiteracy in the Fada N'Gourma region (east of Burkina). In

addition to this campaign against illiteracy, the association ensures the education of its members in such diverse occupations as shoemaking and repairs, hairdressing, sewing, weaving, domestic farming, as well as other profitable activities.

A senior linguistic instructor at the University of Ouagadougou, Mr. Ouoba has his own ideas on decentralization, admitting, however, that he is not fully aware of what the Burkina authorities propose in this matter. In his opinion, the traditional development planners, who are the intellectuals, are *"used to strong centralization"*. In his words: *"I believe there is an initial need for material and financial measures to accompany decentralization. However, I feel that the most difficult aspect in this process is not the capacity of the local authorities to manage themselves, but rather the ability of senior officials to relinquish some of their privileges in order to properly support the local authorities."* *"The hardest thing"*, he insists, *"is to change the mentality of all those who were educated in an overly centralized system. This is more difficult than convincing the population to participate materially, financially and intellectually."* This somewhat hard but rational analysis shows, specifically, the origin of the entire problem of civilian participation in the decentralization process, and in general, touches upon the question of national development. Benoit Ouoba certainly knows what he is talking about, considering that his association renders valuable services in decentralization activities.

#### **"Organized and responsible people can take the initiative"**

The Tin Tua Association is active in five provinces east of Burkina, and consists of 228 village groups which are organized in what is termed a *"diema"*. The *"diema"* is a departmental union of 12 geographically close village groups who have expressed the desire to work together. Their main interest is to realize the spirit of responsibility which was instilled into the people at the root through decen-

tralized functions. *"We noticed that when decisions were made at the top level, we had problems effectively transforming these into actions. Since founding the 'diemas' we tried to give more responsibility to the lower levels and these then took the initiative. An example: Previously, some activities worked in one fashion or another, but now they function better after receiving a boost."*

Indeed, the "diemas" have been educating 20,000 illiterates annually over the past three years in about 1,100 literary centers. The beneficiaries themselves are those who take charge of expenditures. *"We have 1,026 illiterates in the area who live with families belonging to the Association and who do not pay one franc for their livelihood. We have been functioning for 12 years in this way and it has never been a problem"*, Mr. Ouoba states. *"When people are organized and given responsibilities they can successfully take the initiative in delicate situations,"* he concludes.

For the time being, this conclusion is defined as "informal decentralization" and is certainly shared by many other involved parties, giving real impetus to development at its roots. The same is true for the "Naam" Group found almost everywhere in Burkina (they are present in 26 provinces) due to the initiative of an old former farmer, Mr. Bernard Lédéa Ouédraogo, who is currently mayor of the city of Ouahigouya (in the North). In view of the failure of the "imported development models", Mr. Ouédraogo has brought a traditional form of cooperative called the "Kombi naam" (groups of young people) back into fashion. The Naam Group consists of at least 50 persons from villages. On the department level the "Naam" forms a provincial union and interunion. Together these unions form the Federation of Naam Groups on a national level.

The philosophy of the Naam Groups, according to its founder, is "development without damage". In this spirit they train their members in environmental protection and restoration, in the adminis-

tration of financial units, in handicrafts, fruit drying, reading and writing, etc. *"One must start at the level of the farmer, the way he lives and based on his knowledge, skills and aspirations"*, declares the founder of the Naam Groups. This is another illustration of the decentralization process before it is legally anchored.

These are some good examples, showing the involvement and responsibility of the civilian population, and which should also inspire the national decentralization process. What remains to be defined are forms of adaptation and financial resources, an issue which currently occupies the Burkina authorities and especially the National Commission for Decentralization (NCD).

The Orientation on the Decentralization Process (ODP) was submitted to the National Assembly which is expected to adopt it during its first session in 1998 (the session lasts from March to May). The official involvement of the civilian population in the process of decentralization will take place through a concept known as "rural dynamic" to be ratified by the Parliament. While waiting for enactment of the law, and conforming to the philosophy of "progress" adopted by the NCD to implement the process, the people must be made aware of the decentralization issue.

### **The first task is to inform and educate**

According to the responsible NCD officials: *"It is futile to try and adhere to something which is still being established. Instead, it is better to ask the appropriate questions to find out what could serve decentralization and to build and at the same time lean on the analysis of daily experiences made by different protagonists of decentralization."*

Although pleased with the "informal" examples of successful decentralization, the NCD nevertheless avoids formally associat-

ing the development associations with the process because, as officials emphasize: *"Local development is not necessarily the equivalent of decentralization."*

While waiting for the official structure required to apply decentralization, the NCD is thus performing enormous work in the field to increase public awareness on decentralization issues. Its objective is to encourage all proponents to accept the process in order to promote active participation in its implementation.

Increasing public awareness is supported by diverse communication programs whose purpose is to provide each Burkina citizen with the means to allow him to reflect on the contents and conditions of implementing decentralization. Essentially, such programs include *theater forums*, *question and answer groups (QAG)* ("cercles d'écoute-réponse"), *reflection and animation groups (RAG)* ("groupes de réflexion et d'animation", GRA), information and formation seminars, national language support programs, etc.

The civilian population is especially receptive to the theater forums and question and answer groups. The first initiative consists of a theater-forum play on decentralization (performance followed by a public debate) which already took place at public meetings in 33 locations across the 45 provinces of the country.

In all Burkina Faso provinces, the reflection and animation groups (RAG) represent a network of men and women who wish to organize themselves on a voluntary basis with the organizational and practical aspects of preparing for the implementation of decentralization. They function essentially through public conferences.

The question and answer groups (QAG) were conceived to provide the framework for informal communication on the village level. Their establishment involves the local community and/or

associated radio stations, members of the RAG, village animators selected and educated by the NCD as well as NCD members.

By linking experiences with “informal decentralization” to business actions, the NCD seeks to ensure that Burkina can keep all its promises regarding the decentralization process. In any case, many participants believe in it, according to Mr. Ouoba: *“I’m not an optimist by nature but I think that decentralization can work.”*



## **B The Legal Framework**

### **Interview with Antoine Ragot Sawaogo, President of the National Commission for Decentralization (NCD)**

Burkina Faso enacted a law on decentralization under its Constitution (adopted in June 1991) to be used as a method of organization by local authorities. In November 1993 the National Commission for Decentralization (NCD) was called to life and given the task of launching the decentralization process. Officially established in July 1994, the NCD is presided by Antoine Ragot Sawaogo. In the following interview he evaluates the process of decentralization in Burkina three years after its implementation.

Is the decentralization process in Burkina Faso simply conforming to a trend or was there a real need for it?

I do not know how decentralization is perceived and understood elsewhere, but in Burkina Faso we consider it a historical opportunity. Indeed, the present stage of development of our country together with the government's determination to promote local development and ensure democratic evolution by letting it take root locally, will make decentralization a process that cannot be ignored. We thus feel it is a means and not an end. It repositions

our State into the role of facilitator and development assistant, while placing citizens in the center of the decision-making process. It also means implementing local development policies. Our decentralization process is thus built upon a group of political-administrative and economic transformations which together should help create a new form of citizenship. Consequently, it represents steady, controlled and progressive work, and is thus in sharp contrast to the insecurity linked to the word "trend".

#### **Did Burkina Faso have any previous experiences with decentralization?**

When raising the question of past experiences, one must differentiate between institutional and what I call "informal" decentralization.

From an institutional point of view we note that the history of Burkina is marked by many attempts at decentralization, none of which were ever completed. In spite of numerous politically committed endeavors, and prior to the municipal elections of 1995, Burkina Faso has not had universal suffrage since 1966.

In contrast to the lack of explicit references to institutional decentralization, we observe a strong expression of "informal decentralization" which is always characterized by a noticeable participation of the population in community development actions.

#### **What are the main decentralization aspects in Burkina Faso?**

First, Burkina decentralization is based on fundamental decentralization principles and characteristics, thus reflecting a progressive and consensual type of decentralization, founded upon respect for unity and national cohesion. Its implementation takes into account different local characteristics and moves into two directions: urban and rural decentralization.

**Does the decentralization process in Burkina show any specific characteristics when compared to experiences made in subregions and elsewhere?**

I do not know how to make a comparison between the Burkina process and any decentralization efforts currently in progress elsewhere, insofar as each country opts for a decentralization model which conforms best to its own ambitions and circumstances.

Yet if one attempts to make a global classification, a comparison of the Burkina process could be made with three groups of countries. First, there are the countries in the subregions who have been engaged in the decentralization process long before Burkina Faso. These are Senegal, Ghana and the Ivory Coast. Second, we find countries in which the process began almost at the same time as in Burkina Faso, for example Mali. And finally, there is a group of countries who most likely began their decentralization efforts some time after we did. I believe that Niger and Benin could be ranked in this category. Moreover, I would like to add that although Burkina decentralization is enriched by experiences made in neighboring or even geographically distant countries, it still remains an endogenous process.

**How do you assess the past three years of decentralization efforts?**

In terms of acquired experience, efforts were made on two main levels. Generally, such efforts involved different participants, and specifically, they centered on the community development level. As concerns general experience, notable recognition is given to the NCD whose communicative and educational measures have made the local civilian population and the administrative and political authorities aware of questions surrounding decentralization. Furthermore, it is easy to see that some adjustments are taking place along the lines of reallocating responsibilities between state



services and local representatives. In addition, orientation documents on decentralization were drawn up.

After three years of work, we see profound changes taking place in communities with regard to both democratic progress and the strengthening of the local economic base.

The emergence of a democratic culture has thus permitted community institutions to function effectively and to assume substantially more responsibility in contributing financially to their start-up funds (FODECAM). Community participation, initially estimated to be about 5 percent, was thus raised to 31.38 percent.

We also made the observation that all communities registered beneficial results in matters of recovery and budgetary performance. In other words, they have at least doubled the rate of budget implementation for a complete year.

Beyond the knowledge gained, numerous challenges must still be met, such as the illiteracy problem found with an important minority of locally elected representatives (32 percent). This disadvantage obviously limits their ability to participate in decision-making, resulting in weak profitability of local, fiscal resources and the burden of supervising local authorities.

### **How do partners contribute to the implementation process?**

The contributions made by our technical and financial partners in implementing the decentralization process are invaluable.

However, I would like to clarify that we receive two types of support from our financial partners. On the one hand, our decentralization efforts are supported by certain countries or institutions, each in an individual manner. And on the other hand, we have so-called "collective silent partners", meaning several countries (Canada, Netherlands, Switzerland, Denmark) who have agreed to put their resources into a common pool intended for decentralization purposes. The latter form of support is especially efficient because it permits us to work in an atmo-

sphere of mutual confidence and with a minimum of administrative complexity.

Besides, the knowledge which our decentralization process brought us after three years of implementation efforts is largely dependant on the actual and effective commitment of the collective members at our side. Thanks to the financial and even technical aid stemming from the already mentioned "collective partners", supportive measures were thus created, such as starter funds for communities (FODECOM) and services for community administration and development (SAGEDECOM), which today are gaining popularity in our subregion. In this connection, permit me here to express on behalf of the NCD our sincere gratitude to those countries who agreed to participate in the implementation of this original supportive decentralization measure.

**Are there any risks involved in decentralizing power in a young nation such as Burkina where the national conscience is still being formed?**

One of the basic principles of our decentralization process is the respect for national cohesion and unity. Besides, decentralization was never based on the vague desires of irredentists. On the contrary, it has proven to echo certain independent movements in several nations in the sense that it favors plural expression which in turn cements a united democratic state.

**It is said that decentralization cannot be successful without the transfer of resources. Is this the case in Burkina Faso? Or is it more their availability rather than their transfer which poses a problem?**

Burkina Faso is certainly a country with modest resources, yet the meticulousness with which we manage them deserves the admiration of those who have more resources than we do. In addition, it must be noted that our country's potential resources are not

used sufficiently. Decentralization should favor improved mobilization of local resources through local management.

Besides, decentralization does not place new burdens on the State. Instead it assumes that when the State transfers responsibilities to the base levels, according to the subsidiary principle, these are simultaneously accompanied by a subsequent transfer of resources.

### **How is decentralization progressing in the rural areas?**

I have already mentioned that the decentralization efforts initiated in Burkina Faso are split into an urban and a rural decentralization process. The progress which we observed in the implementation phase compelled us to begin our decentralization efforts in the urban areas. Nevertheless, the orientation projects on decentralization submitted to the National Assembly accord rural decentralization an important role so that the adoption of said projects should enable it to work. The NCD also suggests drawing up a charter in this connection.

### **What are the future perspectives for the decentralization process in Burkina Faso?**

The perspectives listed under preprojects in the orientation on the decentralization process (ODP) preview:

- the creation of local community administrations in rural areas;
- the setup of regional structures to allow decentralization of State services with an administrative authority to coordinate activities;
- the creation of assistance funds for local authorities;
- the setup of public interest groups (PIG) in coordination and agreement with local authorities and the State;

- the simultaneous transfer of responsibilities and resources between the State and local authorities;
- the relaxing of supervision;
- the creation of a lasting financial structure for local development, and
- the substantial increase in the transfer of resources to local authorities by assigning assets, a fiscal organization more favorable to local authorities, and establishing more firm measures and supporting instruments.

*(translated from French)*