Colonial and contemporary approaches to community development: a comparative overview of similarities and differences in West African experiences

Introduction

It is difficult to imagine that nearly ten years ago, there was a bitter struggle between two dominant world systems – the capitalist world led by the USA and the Socialist camp led by the Soviet Union. Very few people would have imagined then that the ex-Soviet Union would have collapsed so rapidly. Its collapse has brought in its wake a world torn apart by wars whose roots lie in a struggle by different nationalities to assert their identity. The former Yugoslavia has disintegrated into states ‘engineered’ largely on ethnic lines. There is increasing recognition that nationality and identity questions can no longer be swept under the carpet.

However, the post cold war world appears to have laid to rest the attempt

1. In this article, community development is used in the limited sense to refer to expansion of socio-economic infrastructure, especially in rural communities, involving local organisations.
2. The author grew up in northern Ghana, was actively involved with community organisations in London in the mid-1980s, worked with British NGOs (the Panos Institute, ACORD), helped establish AFFORD (an African-led NGO aiming to promote networking among African development NGOs and Associations in London, as well as strengthen their links with development activity in Africa). He is currently working with the DFID-CBDD renewable natural resource project in Nigeria as the Rural Development and Training Facilitator.
to actively engineer social development through the state, using as an instru-
ment five-year development plans. There now appears to be an unques-
tioning faith in market forces as the main instrument for promoting 
economic development. Alongside the above has been the reduced role for 
the state as a promoter of social and economic development. The USA has 
been at the forefront of the weakening of the state and the promotion of 
‘free markets’ whilst ensuring that its national interests are safeguarded.

Ever since the assault made on the state during the Reagan and Thatcher 
eras, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have increasingly been 
called upon to fill the gap created by the withdrawal of the state from social 
service provision. NGOs have now become a major vehicle for channelling 
development assistance to Africa.

But as NGOs (whose umbilical cords are attached to external donors) 
come under increasing scrutiny, organisations hitherto considered anath-
ema to development and practically shunned are being recognised as impor-
tant players in the development process (Francis, 1996). It is particularly 
interesting that the notion of non-state organisations in development is 
increasingly being redefined to include organisations which hitherto would 
not qualify for development assistance (DFID, 1998).

In the case of Nigeria, Community Development Associations (CDAs) 
(home area associations) have become important players in the develop-
ment process. CDAs, widespread in the south and middle belt of the 
country, are moving beyond socio-economic infrastructure into more com-
prehensive development interventions such as savings/credit promotion, 
utilisation of improved technology etc. In recognition of their role, Ford 
Foundation’s work in Nigeria has included strengthening the capacity of 
CDAs to promote development activity.

Migrant associations of ethnic groups from Mali, Senegal and Morocco 
and elsewhere are currently playing an active role in promoting develop-
ment in their areas of origin, very often with the financial support of French 
local government authorities. African governments are increasingly calling 
upon CDAs to fill the gap created by the retreating state. It is now not so 
‘politically incorrect’ to discuss the role that organisations based on ethnic-
ity or areas of origin can play in the development process (AFFORD, 1998).

In this article, we revisit the development process in Africa focusing in 
particular on community development experiences. We retrace, compare 
and contrast attempts made under English and French colonialism to 
promote community development. The term community development 
came into the development discourse after the Second World War when the 
colonising powers realised that they needed a framework under which the 
colonies could engage in development activity. Its French version was 
referred to as ‘animation rurale’ under which rural communities were 
organised into groups. We examine the changes that have occurred over the 
last three decades in Francophone and Anglophone West Africa in the area 
of grassroots development. We use some case studies to help draw out some 
potential implications for development initiatives in the sub-region. We
suggest that there is a need to undertake a fundamental rethink of the structure and role of the state in society.

Community development under colonialism

French colonial experiences

In French West Africa, community development, the development of political and administrative structures and the promotion of co-operatives were by and large different sides of the same coin. They were designed primarily to serve colonial interests and facilitate colonial rule.

Co-operatives, the aspects with a ‘community development’ dimension, developed around the primary producing sectors. In the territories currently constituted as Mali and Burkina Faso, co-operative organisations were a characteristic feature of the cotton producing areas, with French textile companies playing a key role in their development. The distinctive feature of the co-operative experience in French West Africa was the attempt made to create ‘co-operative’ groups even in areas where cash crop production was non-existent.

The first ‘co-operatives’ established at village level were called ‘Native Providence Societies for Agricultural Loans and Aid’ (Sociétés Indigènes de prévoyance, de secours et de prêts mutuels agricoles: SIPs). SIPs were first started in Algeria and concentrated initially on the organisation of food silos. These silos had more to do with meeting the food supply needs of the colonial administration than with the food security interests of rural producers. SIPs were extended to Senegal (where the interest was in groundnut cultivation) and other areas of French West Africa. Their objectives included the establishment of reserve seeds for sowing, the purchase of agricultural implements for hire or sale to members and the building of reserves as insurance against drought.

An overview of the activities of one of the oldest medium-sized co-operative societies in Senegal operating in one of the cercles in Senegal with a population of 70,000 (60% of whom were members), is quite representative of the whole of French West Africa (present day Sahel). The basic difference between these institutions in the various administrative areas was mainly in terms of scale and emphasis. Their common feature was their firm integration into the colonial administrative structure.

For this association, in 1950 the single most important expenditure category was staff salaries, which took up 31.6% of total expenditure. This was followed by acquisition of materials (cars, bicycles etc.) (9.9%) and maintenance of seed stores (8.2%). Maintenance of seed stores and transport of selected seed together took up 12.3% of total expenditure. Meanwhile, improvement of cultivation took up only 4.6% of total expenditure whilst loans to members constituted only 3.7% of total expenditure.

Whilst membership of ‘co-operatives’ was initially voluntary, a decree passed in 1915 made it compulsory because of a poor response by local
people. Membership was linked to tax and labour obligations imposed on the local people. Also, all people liable for payment of tax were considered members. They therefore lacked a key feature of co-operative enterprise-free association. Members were compelled to build up food security stocks not necessarily for their own benefit but to ensure that urban areas were well provided for. This was done through the compulsory forfeiture of a portion of peasants' cereal harvest in order to cater for the burgeoning bureaucracy of the colonial administration and its work gangs. SIPs had the power to seize any peasants' land if it was deemed to be in the public interest.

One conclusion that can be drawn from the above is that these so-called rural 'co-operatives' had more to do with administering the area than improving cultivation. But the colonial administration had political goals and their introduction produced unpleasant effects. The functioning of these institutions led to frequent peasant revolts. Consequently, their name was changed in 1945 to Sociétés Africaines de Prévoyance (SAP) (African Providence Society) and later, in 1953, to Sociétés Mutuelles de Production Rurale (SMPR) (Rural Mutual Production Society). This was part of an attempt to reorganise them in the light of previous experiences. The declared aim was to regroup farmers into 'co-operatives' with a view to training them on improved farming techniques. Membership of these institutions comprised delegates elected by villagers at general meetings. An administrative council or management board was set up for SMPRs, made up of elected and ex-officio members appointed by the French Administration, with the French military governor for the area acting as president of the board.

Like the previous institutions, SMPRs were not created in response to the real needs of the rural people, and as such were not accountable to them. Colonial provincial authorities were specifically ordered to create such structures. They were managed by colonial appointees whose basic brief included getting these structures to supply the colonial administration with specific quantities of food items, provide the labour needed to carry out colonial projects and encourage the production and exportation of cash crops, notably cotton and groundnuts. Although these institutions had considerable financial resources, they did not attract the support of peasants. It was obvious to farmers that colonial 'co-operatives' had little to do with their priority area of agricultural production – cereal grain cultivation. Though SMPRs built grain storage facilities and standby food supplies, this was secondary to their objective of encouraging the utilisation of improved seed in the cultivation of export crops. By 1956, they were again renamed and became known as Société Mutuelles de Développement Rurale (SMDR) (Mutual Societies for Rural Development). Although SMDRs were given a clear civil status with financial autonomy, they remained controlled by the administration.

The picture that emerges from the above is one in which 'community
development’ was primarily driven by the state and concentrated mainly on increasing agricultural production and expanding political/administrative infrastructure. In the rural areas, it did not include an expansion of socio-economic infrastructure. The extent to which the experience with French colonialism differed from the British colonial experience is explored below.

**British colonial experience**

Community development experience, under British colonialism differed from the French mainly in style rather than substance. In Nigeria, and the then Gold Coast (now Ghana), colonial agricultural policy laid emphasis on export crop cultivation. There was little interest in developing communities (in terms of socio-economic infrastructure) beyond aspects which also served colonial interests. For example, in northern Nigeria the colonial state invested a lot in building up the political infrastructure. Between 1910 and 1911, 43% of total government expenditure was on public administration (Abdulkadir, 1987). Increased interest in food crop cultivation was largely a consequence of sharp increases in demand for food due to the proliferation of non-producers – armies, permanent and seasonal workers, colonial and native authority bureaucrats (Abdulahi, 1991).

Britain’s primary interest was in the export crop sector which they sought to stimulate using measures such as confiscating and vesting land in the state, introducing taxes as a vehicle for stimulating cash crop production and allowing British merchant companies to develop structures for purchasing export crops. Produce buying groups emerged in the 1920s when British trading interests encouraged aspiring traders to supply cocoa beans to agents of trading firms such as the United Africa Company (UAC) and the United Trading Company (UTC). Buying associations were formed to facilitate the purchase of cocoa, a development that was of interest to both the colonial government and European merchant companies. The activities of these associations were as a result put under the umbrella of the colonial department of agriculture. The department offered incentives such as short-term loans, bonuses and storage facilities to purchasing associations in exchange for high quality produce.

What the above illustrates is a clear de-linking of stimulation of export crop cultivation from the construction of socio-economic infrastructure in rural areas. British colonial authorities did not seek to actively reorganise rural communities for purposes of community or co-operative development. State-led socio-economic infrastructural expansion was by and large achieved through labour mobilisation and was limited in coverage. Traditional institutions of chieftaincy were the main vehicles around which labour was mobilised. It is worth pointing out that alongside state-led initiatives, communities themselves did organise to improve their well being. In the rural areas, age groups and organisational forms intertwined with the traditional patterns of authority were important vehicles for community
development. In major towns, hometown associations served an important function of helping new migrants integrate into the new urban setting. Some associations developed into structures for promoting the socio-economic interests of individual members (involving rotating savings schemes). Others took on board the adjudication of conflict among kinsfolk.

What were the implications of the different colonial experiences on community development approaches? The French experience put more emphasis on developing new forms of organisation. In the process, they often undermined or by-passed existing forms of social organisation for community development. Consequently, traditional forms of organisation (often in community development activity) remained undeveloped whilst these new forms – Village Groups – were seen primarily as alien institutions tied to the colonial state.

In the case of British colonial experiences, traditional institutions were utilised but there was no attempt to stimulate new forms of social organisation to promote community development. In the process, whilst age groups, migrant associations and town/village development committees associated with traditional political institutions continued, their modus operandi were not significantly informed by modern or western organisational methods. Consequently, they maintained their traditional features of being male dominated and hierarchical. The implications of these colonial experiences on community development approaches over the last three decades shall be explored in the next section.

**Contemporary approaches – from independence to the post cold war era**

The main preoccupation of many of the independence leaders was to expand the limited socio-economic infrastructure inherited from the colonial rulers. The state was the main vehicle by which traditional society was to be modernised. In the case of Ghana, there was a rapid expansion of socio-economic infrastructure led by the state. This rapid expansion was informed by the desire to modernise the society and economy but in a manner that corrected the pattern of uneven development inherited from the British. It was possible to do this because of Ghana’s favourable economic situation. Community development (i.e. socio-economic infrastructure) was therefore led primarily by the state as part of the overall process of rapid modernisation through development planning. This process invariably involved undermining traditional social institutions especially those that revolved around the institution of chieftaincy and replacing them with socio-political organisations such as the Young Pioneers and Farmers’ Brigades.

In the case of Francophone West Africa, Village Groups in the case of Burkina and state-led co-operatives in the case of Mali, remained the main form of promoting development at the community level. In Niger,
co-operatives developed into a national body – the Union Nigérienne de crédit et de co-œpératives (UNCC), dissolved in 1984 by the government and replaced by the UNC – Union Nigérienne de co-œpératives.

Alongside the state-led co-operatives (which were by and large focused on agriculture related activities) were various forms of self-help organisations with broader development objectives. Youth Clubs of the Senegal River Delta (Adams, 1982) and Groupements Naam (originating initially from Burkina Faso and expanding into neighbouring countries) were examples of community-led organisations involved in projects such as construction of rural roads, wells, schools as well as income generating activities. Although these organisations were autonomous from the state, they frequently worked in partnership with the state.

In the Anglophone world, community development activities continued to revolve around traditional institutions. Village/Town Development Committees were set up in many areas of southern Ghana with the primary purpose of mobilising local resources for the construction of socio-economic infrastructure. Villages and Towns with sizeable numbers of their communities working in major towns were invariably able to mobilise more resources for the construction of health and educational infrastructure.

Migrants and community development

The role of migrants in community development is widespread in the West Africa region. What is distinctive about Francophone West Africa is the way in which migrant-led development initiatives dominate the landscape and have operated outside the direct control of traditional structures of authority. In the Casamance region of Senegal, a white-collar worker inspired by a burst of enthusiasm organised eleven villages in 1974, eventually leading to the creation of the Rural Youth Association of the Casamance region (AJAC). A returnee migrant from the Ivory Coast formed the Nongtaaba Committee of Nakamtenga in Burkina Faso. The activities of the committee included water and soil conservation, reforestation, livestock breeding and construction projects such as schools, village consumer shops, and drug stores. Returnee migrants are currently leading the more successful Union of Village Groups of Arbinda, in Burkina Faso (Atampugre, 1997).

In Mali, there has also been an upsurge of village associations. These developed outside the framework of the state controlled co-operatives, which had characterised the country during the two decades of one party rule under Mousa Traoré. Many of these associations involve migrants within and outside Mali. Significant is the co-ordination that exists between village/town associations and their counterpart associations in France formed by members of the respective villages working in that country as migrants. The Paris office of the Panos Institute conducted a study, of village/town associations of migrants from countries of the Senegal River
Table 1: Projects/activities undertaken by Village Associations in Mali, Mauritania and Senegal

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. per sector</th>
<th>Proportion (%)</th>
<th>Average year of completion</th>
<th>First year of project</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agricultural inputs</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6.94</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-operative activities (collective farms)</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>6.07</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consumption</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>17.92</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cultural (mosques)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>11.85</td>
<td>1979</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Water</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>16.47</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>15.90</td>
<td>1985</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>20.23</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Services</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4.62</td>
<td>1988</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>346</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>1987</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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basin (Mali, Senegal, and Mauritania). The study of 105 of these associations showed that migrant associations had, since their formation in the 1980s, financed about 346 projects in their villages of origin totalling 46 million French Francs or about 4.6 million pounds.

Of this amount, 3.6 million pounds came from contributions of migrant workers, the remainder representing the financial contributions of partners such as NGOs and French City authorities who have twinned with towns and villages of the region.

The data above show that health, consumer goods, water and schools constituted the priority areas. These were the areas which received most financial assistance from migrant associations and indicate the importance attached to socio-economic infrastructure within the respective villages.

The provision of consumer goods has been achieved through an elaborate mechanism, which makes it possible for those resident in France to respond directly to the needs of their families left back in the village. It worked like this: 'X' receives a request from his/her family for grain, and other consumer items. S/he contacts his/her village association in Paris, which works out the total cost. S/he pays the association the amount (by instalments if it is beyond an individual's means) and his/her family in Mali is supplied with the items. This was possible because these associations had established shops where they regularly sent consumer items and had sought to improve communication between France and Mali using modern communication facilities such as fax machines.

The collapse of the state in terms of its social provisioning capability and the increasing role being played by migrant associations is also a feature of community development activity in Nigeria. The difference however is the role of migrant associations closely tied to traditional patterns of social organisation.
Table 2: Community development projects undertaken by the Isalu Community, Iseyin, Nigeria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Project</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>35 km Bode Isalu-Ikere road</td>
<td>1940s</td>
<td>Direct labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.4 km Olobo-Alayin road</td>
<td>1954</td>
<td>Direct labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Owode market at Ikere</td>
<td>1954/55</td>
<td>Not available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1½ km Ita Molosin-Isoko – Oluwele road</td>
<td>1967</td>
<td>Direct labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 km Bode Isalu-Okere Igere–Oke Alafia road</td>
<td>1970</td>
<td>Direct labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1½ km Bode Isalu Our Lady Hospital – Saki road</td>
<td>1972</td>
<td>Direct labour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 deep wells (already commissioned)</td>
<td>1988/89</td>
<td>30,000 Naira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 deep wells (almost completed)</td>
<td>1992/93</td>
<td>20,000 Naira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 hectare land to build Isalu community centre at Elera, Isalu</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>25,000 Naira</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purchase and perimeter survey of 1128 m² of land at Ogunbado, Isalu</td>
<td>1993</td>
<td>5,000 Naira</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The OFFA descendants union of Kwara State of Nigeria was formed on 13 October 1935. It was formed primarily for the political, social and economic emancipation of the OFFA people and specifically to get their own district. The union and traditional authorities have been responsible for major development initiatives in the area (Olatinwo, 1995). They have built a hospital, a primary school, and contributed to the provision of water and electricity.

Similarly the Isalu Community Development Union has been instrumental in the construction of socio-economic infrastructure in Iseyin, Nigeria. A market, roads, wells and a community centre are examples of the Union’s achievements as illustrated by the table above. In this process, descendants of the area resident in Lagos and Ibadan have been more effective in terms of their financial contributions than the home branch.

The increasing role that more successful unions and associations are playing in socio-economic infrastructural provision has attracted the interest of the state. In the case of Nigeria, the state is increasingly calling on community organisations to make significant contributions to development in their areas of origin. Training centres have been set up, for example in Enugu (Southeastern Nigeria) to train state community development staff and thereby provide linkages between political and informal development processes. In many areas, the state has actively encouraged the formation of CDAs. The state sees CDAs primarily as channels but not necessarily as partners. A genuine partnership would entail recognition of the independence of these organisations especially their right to disagree with government policy.

The upsurge of community development associations encouraged and recognised by the government as channels for promoting development
(Langley et al., 1996) has not been without problems. It has been suggested that in areas where the formation of community development associations is primarily driven by the state, the results have been unsatisfactory. Funtua, in Katsina State – Nigeria, is reported to have over fifty community development associations – Funtua Progressive Union, Maska Community Development Union, Tudun Wada Community Development Association, and Yoruba Development Union are examples. Many of these were formed primarily to complement government efforts. Existing CDAs handle more than 50% of local authority projects in Katsina State. They receive their income from donations, contributions, aid and government grants and openly associate with political affairs, advising people on their civic rights.

This association with government has invariably resulted in a situation whereby wealthier members of their communities dominate CDAs. They see in CDAs an opportunity to advance their own political agendas, often leading to conflict among the leadership. Consequently, many CDAs are being accused of being corrupt and a breeding group for ethnic, religious and cultural conflict.

There are significant similarities as well as differences between community development experiences in Francophone and Anglophone West Africa. These differences and similarities vary within and between countries. The most important similarity is the increasing importance of migrant associations (in the Francophone world and home-town/village associations or CDAs in the Anglophone world) in community development initiatives. Both forms of organisation are increasingly becoming professional (e.g. record keeping, accountability to their membership) in the way they operate and are increasingly attracting support from sources outside their respective communities.

There are nevertheless important differences. Although the experience in French West Africa was initially state-led and directed, community led organisations have successfully fought for and won independent political space for their operations. They have a longer track record in mobilising internal resources for community development activity. The state in those parts of West Africa is no longer able to directly control and manage the operations of these organisations. To a large extent, they are able to decide on the terms of their engagement with the state.

In Anglophone West Africa, although the state did not initially seek to reorganise rural society in the name of community development, governments in the region now actively seek to co-opt community organisations into their development agendas. In the process, they are becoming important arenas where the struggle for political power among competing elite is manifesting itself. Where the spirit of community development is low, the state has taken the lead, quite often with negative consequences. In areas where community organisations have maintained some relative autonomy from the state, they have remained important agents of transformation in their respective communities.
Perspectives for the future

The end of the cold war, the withdrawal of the state as the principal actor in development, the increasing role of NGOs in development and the generalised acceptance that community participation is central to development has led to a shift in development thinking. Decentralised development – involving the major stakeholders at community level in directing and managing the development process – is now the ‘new’ development paradigm. In the case of Ghana, district assemblies are now the institutions around which development initiatives at community level are to be guided. In Nigeria, the creation of local government areas (LGAs) as decentralised structures around which community development is to be spearheaded bears testimony to the desire to make local communities the main architects of their own development.

In Francophone West Africa, the decentralisation process is gathering pace in Burkina Faso with the election of municipal authorities in towns and the district authorities in rural areas. A similar process is taking place in Mali with the creation of decentralised development and administrative structures in the various regions of the country. In the above processes, all major stakeholders – traditional structures, local development organisation, decentralised state structures are expected to co-ordinate their efforts in a manner that is conducive to the socio-economic advancement of their respective communities.

The above processes have major implications for the character of the post-colonial state. As mentioned earlier, the post-colonial state saw itself as the main architect of development. That is why it arrogated to itself the right to appropriate the wealth of communities. If it is relinquishing the development initiative to decentralised structures, does it have the right to appropriate at the national level resources that different communities consider as their natural endowment before deciding how to redistribute the national cake? Will increasing taxation of communities at the local level lead to a fundamental questioning of the right of the central state to collect revenue at the community level? How will the new development dispensation cope with the pattern of uneven development inherited from colonialism and the serious disparities in natural resource endowment within countries, states, districts and villages? If the central state ceases to control national resources and accepts that it is no longer the main architect of development, what legitimacy will national political decision-makers have?

In raising these questions we wish to revisit the debate on the role of the state in development. We are drawing attention to some of the paradoxes in the on-going emphasis on decentralised development, especially as manifested through community development efforts. CDA’s are more often than not dominated by men, frequently marginalise the youth and do not respond effectively to the needs of poorer sections of their communities.

We do not question the relevance, appropriateness and legitimacy of the
approach in terms of harnessing the skills and potential at local levels. It nevertheless is useful to draw attention to the limitations of decentralised development. It is worth asking if a thoroughly decentralised approach is conducive to sustainable national development. It is our view that the state, through national level stimulation, promotion and co-ordination, will remain the most appropriate vehicle for promoting integrated development. The recent experiences of the Southeast Asian countries notwithstanding, their achievements have been primarily the result of centrally stimulated and co-ordinated development initiatives. The challenge is to develop a democratic state capable of reflecting and advancing the needs of the majority in society.

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