

Doctrines and Practices of Agrarian Development: The Case of the Office du Niger in Mali

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ABSTRACT

Der Beitrag handelt von einem großen Bewässerungsprojekt im Binnendelta des Niger, dem Office du Niger. Geplant nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg und gegründet 1932 ist es eines der ältesten Entwicklungsprojekte im ländlichen Raum, die es gibt. Vom kolonialen Paradigma der Produktion über die Vision einer sozialistischen ländlichen Wirtschaft bis hin zu den liberalen Ansätzen der Zeit nach 1980 haben exogene Entwicklungsdoktrinen seine Geschichte maßgeblich geprägt. Der Aufsatz argumentiert, dass das Office du Niger zwar grundlegendem institutionellem und sozialem Wandel unterlag. Über seine lange Geschichte hinweg sind jedoch auch Kontinuitäten sichtbar, wie etwa das Phänomen der strukturellen Gewalt, die Betonung von Produktivität und hierarchische Entscheidungsprozesse, die die Möglichkeiten der Siedler einschränken.

Introduction

From far above, the interior delta of the river Niger looks like a huge oasis. Located within the semi-arid Sahel zone, creeks, canals, fields and meadows stretch over an area of 30,000 square kilometers. They provide the livelihood for about a million people. It is here that one of the oldest large development schemes is located, the Office du Niger in central Mali. Planned after World War I and founded in 1932, the Office du Niger, a large irrigation scheme, looks back upon a history of contestation, high expectations, and troubled relations between farmers and authorities.

By using the Office du Niger as a prism, this article traces the history of agrarian development doctrines and practices over *la longue durée*. It raises the following questions: Why was the Office du Niger founded, what was its rationale, and in which ways is it characteristic for late colonial agrarian development schemes? What kind of development doctrines played out on the ground? How did the Office du Niger evolve in the post-independence period? Why did the international donor community get involved in the project? What were their plans, and how did they realize them? And how did changing development doctrines impact on local farmers over time?

The article offers an analysis of one of the oldest agrarian development schemes that has persisted until the present day. Furthermore, it provides insight into the changing meaning of agrarian development over a long period. My main argument will be that while developmental strategies have changed considerably over time and have found their way into actual practices, long-term continuities can be detected. This concerns in particular three features: the persistence of structural violence; the primacy of economic interests over the well-being of the agents of development, the settlers, and the inherent necessity of planning and top-down interventions in all matters influencing the development scheme, including the promotion of 'grass roots', bottom-up and civil society activities. Histories of development have focused primarily on three fields of enquiry. Most prominently, mainly American scholars have analyzed the role and function of the idea of development in foreign policy. They have highlighted the attractiveness of 'modernization theory' for social scientists and policy makers and have argued that universalist notions of socio-economic development have shaped the conduct of American foreign relations since the late nineteenth century.¹ A second field is interested in the production, dissemination and circulation of knowledge, the role of experts, and the 'scientization' of the social on a global scale.² A third field comprises the critics of development. They have either followed Gramscian notions of a modernist hegemony imposed by the West on the rest of the world or have emphasized the futility and hypocrisy of past and current development policy.³ Compared to these fields, the history of agrarian development has received comparatively little interest.⁴ There are, I think, four reasons for this. First,

1 D. Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission. Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order*, Princeton 2010; N. Gilman, *Mandarins of the Future. Modernization Theory in Cold War America*, Baltimore 2003; M. Latham, *The Right Kind of Revolution. Modernization, Development, and U.S. Foreign Policy from the Cold War to the Present*, Ithaca, NY 2011; A. Staples, *The Birth of Development. How the World Bank, Food and Agricultural Organization, and World Health Organization Changed the World, 1945–1965*, Kent, OH 2006.

2 F. Cooper and R. Packard (eds.), *International Development and the Social Sciences: Essays on the History and Politics of Knowledge*, Berkeley 1996; D. Engerman and C. R. Unger (eds.), *Modernization as a Global Project*, theme issue of *Diplomatic History* 33.3 (2009); R. L. Tignor, *W. Arthur Lewis and the Birth of Development Economics*, Princeton 2006.

3 W. Easterly, *The Tyranny of Experts: Economists, Dictators, and the Forgotten Rights of the Poor*, New York 2014; A. Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World*. With a new preface by the author, Princeton 2011; J. Ferguson, *The Anti-Politics Machine. Development, Depoliticization and Bureaucratic Power in Lesotho*, Minneapolis 1994; D. Moyo, *Dead Aid. Why aid is not working and how there is another way for Africa*, London 2010; J. C. Scott, *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Ithaca, NY 1998.

4 N. Cullather, *The Hungry World. America's Cold War Battle against Poverty in Asia*, Cambridge, MA 2011; F. Ellis

industrialization and infrastructure overshadowed other sectors of development during the twentieth century, and historians have mimicked this emphasis. Second, industrial sites contained far more symbolic significance than agricultural projects. Elites in Africa, Asia and Latin America regarded them as signifiers of modernization, providing them with meanings far out of proportion to their actual importance within the overall development trajectory. Thirdly, development policies were, for a long time, imbued with an 'urban bias' (Michael Lipton).⁵ Agriculture was relegated to the sphere of 'tradition', not really worthy of major attention. Fourth, historians usually work in urban environments. This conditions their outlook and research interests, and distances them from agriculture and rural settings.⁶

A political economy approach to agrarian development in the Office du Niger offers important insight into the ways development agents – farmers, experts, governments and international organizations – have conceptualized the African rural space over a period of almost one hundred years. By political economy approach I understand a methodologically open interdisciplinary design which is interested in the connection between political and economic institutions, the political environment, and the economic system, and how they influence each other. I also draw on Johan Galtung's concept of structural violence. Following his exploration, I take structural violence as the imposition of social and institutional constraints which seriously limit individual choices and create an atmosphere of fear and oppression to explain continuities, and change, of institutional coercion.⁷

This article is based in part on primary sources obtained in the World Bank Archives. It also draws on secondary literature, some of which deals specifically with the history of the Office du Niger. I am in particular referring to Emil Schreyger's pioneering study on the institutional history of the Office du Niger, to Monica van Beusekom's exploration of the colonial history, and to Laura Ann Twagira's recent work on technology, food and gender in the Office du Niger.⁸

and S. Biggs, *Evolving Themes in Rural Development 1950s-2000s*, in: *Development Policy Review* 19 (2001), pp. 437-448; G. Federico, *Feeding the World. An Economic History of Agriculture, 1800-2000*, Princeton 2005; J. M. Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert. Agrarian Doctrines of Development and the Legacies of British Colonialism*, Athens, OH 2007; C. Kay, *Development Strategies and Rural Development. Exploring Synergies, Eradicating Poverty*, in: *Journal of Peasant Studies* 36 (2009), pp. 103-137.

5 M. Lipton, *Why Poor People Stay Poor. Urban Bias in World Development*, Cambridge, MA 1977.

6 C. R. Unger, *Agrarwissenschaftliche Expertise und ländliche Modernisierungsstrategien in der internationalen Entwicklungspolitik, 1920er bis 1980er Jahre*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 41 (2015), pp. 552-579.

7 J. Galtung, *Violence, Peace, and Peace Research*, in: *Journal of Peace Research*, 6.3 (1969), pp. 167-191.

8 M. M. van Beusekom, *Negotiating Development. African Farmers and Colonial Experts at the Office du Niger, 1920-1960*, Oxford 2002; E. Schreyger, *L'Office du Niger au Mali: la problématique d'une grande entreprise agricole dans la zone du Sahel*, Wiesbaden 1984; L. A. Twagira, *Women and Gender at the Office du Niger (Mali): Technology, Environment, and Food ca. 1900-1985*, PhD dissertation thesis, Rutgers University, 2013.

Colonial Visions and African Life Worlds

The origins of the Office du Niger date back to the aftermath of World War I, when public debates focused on the reconstruction of France's war-torn economy. An important aspect of this discussion concerned the dire condition of the textile industry. During the war, the textile industry had come under severe pressure, as cotton imports from the United States had decreased significantly and world market prices exploded. Neo-mercantilist thoughts went hand in hand with ideas to utilize the colonial empire more efficiently in order to make the textile industry, and the nation as a whole, more independent from international markets and supply chains. An outspoken proponent of these ideas was a civil engineer by the name of Emile Bélime (1883–1969). A glowing proponent of Empire until late in his life, Bélime in 1919/20 surveyed the river Niger in what was then the French Soudan at the request of the French Ministry for the Colonies.⁹ Bélime envied the British, who, by means of irrigation, had established large cotton production schemes in the Sudan and in India.¹⁰ In the interior delta of the river Niger, Bélime encountered a solution to the problems of the French textile industry. To the colonial administrations in Dakar and Paris he proposed a large irrigation scheme encompassing an area 37,500 km², two-thirds the size of Belgium. This was a grand plan which involved major resettlements, the dislocation of the largely pastoralist indigenous population, and the construction of dams, roads, and canals in a location about fifteen hundred kilometers away from the nearest port city, Dakar. Bélime's "high modernist" vision was well received by his superiors, in particular by the then minister for the colonies, Albert Sarraut.¹¹ A former governor-general of French Indochina, Sarraut called for a sustained effort to utilize the economic resources of the colonies more efficiently. His concept of *mise en valeur* echoed earlier plans for the exploitation of colonies. What was new was his idea of 'development' in the interest of the colonizers and the colonized.¹² The differentiation between 'exploitation' and 'development', formulated by the British theorist of indirect rule, Frederick Lugard, in 1922, had crystalized in colonial discourses since the late 19th century in the Netherlands and Great Britain.¹³ Because of European

9 See his call for a continued French presence in sub-Saharan Africa in the late colonial period. E. Bélime, *Gardons Afrique. Faits et Documents*, Paris 1955. For context, see R.H. Roberts, *Two Worlds of Cotton. Colonialism and the Regional Economy in the French Soudan, 1800–1946*, Stanford 1996.

10 T. Barnett, *Gezira Scheme: An Illusion of Development*, London 1977; S. Beckert, *Empire of Cotton. A Global History*, New York 2014, pp. 340–358; H. Bell, *Frontiers of Medicine in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, 1899–1940*, Oxford 1999; V. Bernal, *Colonial Moral Economy and the Discipline of Development: The Gezira Scheme and 'Modern' Sudan*, in: *Cultural Anthropology* 12.4 (1997), pp. 447–479; M. W. Ertsen, *Improvising Planned Development on the Gezira Plain, Sudan, 1900–1980*, Basingstoke 2016; D. Gilmartin, *Scientific Empire and Imperial Science: Colonialism and Irrigation Technology in the Indus Basin*, in: *The Journal of Asian Studies*, 53.4 (1994), pp. 1127–1149.

11 Scott, *Seeing Like a State*, p. 89.

12 A. Sarraut, *La Mise en Valeur des Colonies Françaises*, Paris 1923. The standard analysis of French colonial capitalism is still J. Marseille, *Empire Colonial et Capitalisme Français: Histoire d'un divorce*, Paris 1984. See also M. Thomas, *The French Empire between the Wars*, Manchester 2005, pp. 32–33, 61–62.

13 Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*; J. M. Hodge, G. Hödl and M. Kopf (eds.), *Developing Africa. Concepts and Practices in Twentieth-Century Colonialism*, Manchester 2014, pp. 1–34, P. H. Lepenies, *An Inquiry into the Roots of the*

needs for reconstruction, and novel forms to legitimize colonial rule as a “sacred trust”, as the covenant of the League of Nations phrased it, the discourse on ‘development’ gained in importance after World War I.¹⁴

Sarraut’s hopes of re-directing German war reparations to the French colonies soon evaporated. Likewise, Bélime’s vision encountered increasing opposition in the French parliament. The investments needed seemed exorbitant. Experiments with cotton production in the French Soudan were not encouraging. Critics within the French parliament as well as in the public sphere pointed to the factor of labor. Given the sparse population density in the delta, cultivation of the whole area would necessitate the migration of hundreds of thousands of farm workers.¹⁵ But despite the criticism and the megalomaniac character of the plan, the colonial administration in Dakar provided funds for pilot projects. In 1931, when politicians saw national development and protectionism as the solution to the economic crisis which had engulfed the world since 1929, significant metropolitan investments were made available for the construction of an irrigation scheme on 8,500 km². Administrators in Dakar and politicians in France were captivated by the prospect of cheap cotton for the French textile industry and the idea of a granary on the edge of the Sahara. One year later, the Office du Niger was founded as a public development agency for the interior delta of the Niger, with Emile Bélime as founding director (until 1944). The institution and the vision were modelled on the British Gezira scheme in the Sudan. Until the end of the Second World War, some 50 km² in four sectors were prepared for agricultural production. The important dam at Markala was completed in 1947.¹⁶

Under Bélime’s directorship, the vision of *mise en valeur* transmogrified into the violent reality of a labor camp in which the developmentalist impulse exhausted itself in involuntary migration of the settlers, exploitation of labor, enforcement of production goals, and harsh living conditions. The pastoralist inhabitants of the area were expelled, and hardly anyone of the 28,000 settlers who lived in the Office du Niger by 1945 had come voluntarily. Most of the settlers, often young men and women from far-away regions, had been selected by local chiefs on the orders of the French, deported and re-settled in the Office. Polygamy, hardly an ingredient of the civilizing mission which legitimized French colonialism, was encouraged in order to produce as many prospective settlers as possible. Apart from the imperative of production, the Office du Niger was meant to become the nucleus for a model colonial society, a society cut off from its ancestral lands, ethnic bonds and social norms. Colonial modernity, though enforced by violence, would

Modern Concept of Development, in: Contributions to the History of Concepts 4 (2008), pp. 202-225; S. Moon, Technology and Ethical Idealism: A History of Development in the Netherlands East Indies, Leiden 2007.

14 P. Clavin, Securing the World Economy. The Reinvention of the League of Nations, 1920–1946, Oxford 2013; S. Pederson, The Guardians. The League of Nations and the Crisis of Empire, Oxford 2015.

15 M. Echenberg and J. Filipovich, African Military Labour and the Building of the Office du Niger Installations, 1925–1950, in: The Journal of African History 27.3 (1986), pp. 533-551.

16 Beusekom, Negotiating Development, pp. 90-153; Schreyger, L’Office du Niger, pp. 111-134.

eventually conquer the semi-arid space of the French empire's interior frontier. Acts of resistance were ubiquitous, ranging from refusal to work to sabotage and escape.¹⁷

Once settlers had arrived in the Office, they were confronted with French technocrats convinced of the superiority of their knowledge and culture. Racism was a pervasive feature. Although conditions for the production of cotton had not been studied in detail, and had indeed shown meagre results, the settlers were forced to grow it.¹⁸ Membership in rural cooperatives closely supervised by the French was mandatory, as was the preparation of the land by heavy oxen-driven ploughs (which routinely destroyed the thin fertile soil layer).¹⁹ Settlers had to sell their crop to the Office du Niger, which dictated the price and marketed the produce. It charged fees for the irrigation and obligated the settlers to maintain the irrigation system. In exchange, the Office provided housing, infrastructure, seeds and technical equipment. But wells were not available at first, which led to a high rate of diseases. Medical centers were equally lacking, as were schools. Village headmen appointed by the French dictated the rhythm of life and work of the settlers. A French observer who toured the Office du Niger in the late 1930s compared the scheme to the forced collectivization of agriculture in the Soviet Union. To her, labor conditions amounted to the re-introduction of slavery.²⁰ Economically, the project was a failure. Until 1939, French investments amounted to around 50 million dollars (in 1960 dollars), and until the end of the colonial period the French sank between 83 and 175 million (in 1960 dollars) into the Office du Niger. This was a multiple of what the colonial administration invested in the whole of the French Soudan (in 1939, around 1.2 million dollars (in 1960 dollars)).²¹

The expectation that French know-how and technology combined with as well as African labor would enable the large-scale production of cotton did not materialize. Planning had been insufficient and deficient. Soil and climatic conditions were not adequate for cotton, and labor was not sufficient, but the high investments prohibited any thoughts about cessation. Almost frantically, Bélime again and again promised higher production rates and returns on the investment.²² His call for further investments and for the

17 I. Dougnon, *Travail de Blanc, Travail de Noir. La migration des paysans dogon vers l'Office du Niger et au Ghana 1910–1980*, Paris 2007, pp. 63–88; J. Filipovich, *Destined to Fail: Forced Settlement at the Office du Niger, 1926–45*, in: *Journal of African History* 42 (2001), pp. 239–260, A. Magasa, *Papa-Commandant a jeté un grand filet devant nous: les exploités des rives du Niger 1900–1962*, Paris 1978.

18 For a comparable project in Togo, see A. Zimmerman, *Alabama in Africa. Booker T. Washington, the German Empire, and the Globalization of the New South*, Princeton 2012.

19 B. Diakon, *L'Appropriation à l'Office du Niger des techniques et la dynamique sociale de l'époque coloniale à nos jours*, PhD dissertation, University of Bayreuth, 2006, pp. 111–203. Diakon shows how settlers modified the ploughs from the 1940s and adapted them to local needs.

20 G. Lydon, *The Unraveling of a Neglected Source: A Report on Women in Francophone West Africa in the 1930s* (La re-découverte d'une source négligée: un rapport sur la condition des femmes en AOF dans les années 1930), in: *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 37 (1997), pp. 555–584.

21 W. I. Jones, *Planning and Economic Policy: Socialist Mali and Her Neighbors*, Washington, D.C. 1976, p. 25; N. van de Walle, *African Economies and the Politics of Permanent Crisis*, Cambridge 2001, p. 143.

22 E. Bélime, *Les Travaux du Niger*, Paris 1940, p. 187. In that, Bélime was certainly not alone. See, for instance, D. L. Hodgson, *Once Intrepid Warriors: Gender, Ethnicity, and the Cultural Politics of Maasai Development*, Bloomington 2001.

successful completion of the irrigation scheme did not go unheard. Supported by the German colonial lobby, the French Vichy regime invested considerable amounts (600 million francs) to enlarge the area under production (a further 2000 km²).²³

Mise en Valeur Redux

The immediate post-war period marks a turning point in the history of development policy in general and of the history of the Office du Niger in particular. During the “second colonial occupation”, government intervention in African territories and resource transfers from the metropolises increased dramatically.²⁴ Colonial powers intended to utilize the economic potential of their dependencies more efficiently in the service of European reconstruction. Equally important, in the face of growing African nationalism and growing calls for independence, development was meant to legitimize continued colonial rule.²⁵ Funding for infrastructure remained high on the agenda, but investments in health and education increased significantly. Of particular concern to metropolitan governments was food production and, accordingly, support for agribusinesses. While in the 1930s government efforts had been directed to channeling abundant food supplies to a world market characterized by low demand, the early post-war years witnessed a fear of food scarcity and efforts to increase production as fast as possible.²⁶ It was in this context that, for instance, the British government implemented the ultimately disastrous Tanganyika groundnut scheme. In a similar vein, French authorities reconsidered their activities in the Office du Niger.²⁷

The Office du Niger was heavily affected by these developments. Criticism of the poor living conditions of the settlers had already been voiced during the 1930s, but following the horrors of World War II, concern for human rights, often voiced by African activists, became an issue in national and international debates.²⁸ In France, a parliamentary commission provided settler voices a platform to be heard. They argued that their live resembled those of “goats tethered to a stake”.²⁹ More than half of the settlers were heavily

23 R. Ginio, *French Colonialism Unmasked. The Vichy Years in French West Africa*, Lincoln, NE 2006, pp. 74-75, and B. Schilling, *Postcolonial Germany. Memories of Empire in a Decolonized Nation*, Oxford 2014, pp. 68-89.

24 J. Lonsdale and D.A. Low, Introduction: Towards the new order 1945-1963, in: D.A. Low and A. Smith (eds.), *History of East Africa*, vol. 3, Oxford 1976, pp. 1-64, here p. 12.

25 F. Cooper, *Africa and the World Economy*, in: F. Cooper et al., *Confronting Historical Paradigms: Peasants, Labor, and the Capitalist World System in Africa and Latin America*, Madison, WI 1993, pp. 84-203, here pp. 127-128; F. Cooper, *Africa Since 1940. The Past of the Present*, Cambridge 2002, pp. 20-24; A. Eckert, ‘We Are All Planners Now.’ *Planung und Dekolonisation in Afrika*, in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 34.3 (2008), pp. 375-397.

26 R. Jachertz and A. Nützenadel, *Coping with hunger? Visions of a global food system, 1930-1960*, in: *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011), pp. 99-119.

27 A. Eckert, *Herrschen und Verwalten. Afrikanische Bürokraten, Staatliche Ordnung und Politik in Tanzania, 1920-1970*, Munich 2007, pp. 101-103, 143-164; D. K. Fieldhouse, *The West and the Third World*, Oxford 1999, pp. 225-235; R. J. Reid, *A History of Modern Africa. 1800 to the Present*, 2nd edn., Malden, MA 2012, pp. 254-255.

28 M. Terretta, ‘We Had Been Fooled into Thinking That the UN Watches Over the Entire World’: Human Rights, UN Trust Territories, and Africa’s Decolonization, in: *Human Rights Quarterly* 34.2 (2012), pp. 329-360.

29 Quoted in Filipovich, *Destined to Fail*, p. 257.

indebted to the Office and lived in a state of debt peonage. Crop yields were much lower than expected; the production of cotton had unequivocally turned out to be a mistake. The irrigation system was in dire need of maintenance; some fields were flushed with water, while others were desiccated. When, in 1946, the French parliament abolished forced labor and the *indigénat*, a discriminatory colonial law code which had provided the management of the Office with the legal instruments of repression, a third of the settlers fled. It was obvious to all observers that in economic terms the project had failed and that in social terms it was a scandal.³⁰

While the Office du Niger faced its most serious crisis yet, construction workers completed the Markala Dam, the single largest dam of the whole irrigation scheme. In view of this, ending the project did not seem an option. Was what needed, rather, were more investments to make the Office profitable. The solutions of the colonial planners in Paris and Dakar were ambitious and did not seem especially new: they demanded more settlers, larger areas under cultivation, new crops, and improved methods of cultivation.

In this difficult situation, the new director, agronomist Pierre Viguier (1946–1951), for the first time sought the advice of the settlers. Following an analysis of local practices, the Office scaled back the production of cotton and moved to rice. Millet production became tolerated for private consumption. The crop rotation prescribed by the French was abandoned in favor of local practices, which left land uncultivated every third year. The management, moreover, tolerated the cultivation of vegetables and other crops on land not irrigated by the Office. Local knowledge and practices were, to some degree, appropriated and constructively utilized, for instance with regards to ploughs.³¹ While this entailed a certain degree of local empowerment, the basic tenets of the project did not change: the primacy of top-down planning, a technocratic approach to problem-solving, the predominance of economic interest and production, and an indifference to the plight of ordinary settlers.

In 1960, Viguier published a book on African agriculture based on thirty years of experience in West Africa. He vehemently criticized the post-war drive for the mechanization of African agriculture, which he called “the grand illusion”. He pointed to an insufficient infrastructure, missing spare parts and high petrol prices.³² Viguier might have added that he had arrived at this conviction after a long and costly period of trial and error. In fact, it was he himself who, upon assuming the post of director of the Office du Niger, had called for large-scale mechanization. Only machines could balance the loss in production incurred by the flight of many of the settlers. When Marshall Plan aid reached

30 Beusekom, *Negotiating Development*, pp. 90, 97, 153; Schreyger, *L'Office du Niger*, pp. 120–135.

31 M. M. van Beusekom, *Disjunctures in Theory and Practice: Making Sense of Change in Agricultural Development at the Office du Niger, 1920–60*, in: *The Journal of African History* 41.1 (2000), pp. 79–99. See also Diakon, *L'Appropriation à l'Office du Niger des techniques et la dynamique sociale*, pp. 111–203.

32 P. Viguier, *L'Afrique de l'Ouest vue par un agriculteur. Problèmes de base en Afrique tropicale*, Paris 1961, pp. 50–51. On unintended economic effects see also M. Rizzi, *What Was Left of the Groundnut Scheme? Development Disaster and Labour Market in Southern Tanganyika 1946–1952*, in: *Journal of Agrarian Change* 6 (2006), pp. 205–238.

the Office two years later, Viguié ordered tractors. Two comprehensive French development programs, initiated between 1949 and 1956, enabled the Office to acquire more. By the end of the decade, the Office owned 120 tractors in 15 different models, 21 of which could still be used. The rest corroded for the reasons Viguié had outlined in his book.³³

The mechanization of agriculture in Africa seemed promising for a variety of reasons. Though the Office du Niger attracted a substantial number of new settlers in the decade following the abolition of forced labor (the settler population increased from 22,500 in 1948 to 49,600 in 1964), the labor force remained insufficient to maintain the complex irrigation scheme and support the salary of 7,000 employees in the various non-farm branches of the Office (1955). Mechanized extension of cultivated land, deep ploughing and the use of chemical fertilizers were meant to increase production in the face of continuing labor deficits. Finally, the use of machines and paid farm labor could eventually make possible the extensive and rational plantation economy which Béline and other planners had envisaged. Indeed, rice yields per hectare increased to between 1.6 and 2 tons. Cotton yields, however, averaged between 0.7 and 1 ton per hectare between 1947 and 1964. This was lower than expected and did not reach the production levels obtained, for instance, by irrigated farming in India. The management responded with ever increasing fees for water. However, when high fees decreased settler incomes and increased their debts to the Office, they behaved rationally and switched to an informal economy. Towards the end of the 1950s, mechanized agriculture was discontinued for financial and technical reasons, and settlers were again called upon to work their land with the oxen plough.³⁴ After forty years of planning and implementing a large development scheme in the interior delta of the Niger, two central aims of the project had not been fulfilled: neither had the huge return on investments been realized nor had the living conditions of the settlers improved considerably.

The condition of the Office du Niger was emblematic of larger problems of European late colonial and development policies on the eve of decolonization. By 1957/58, a critical segment of the political elites in Europe's capitals was convinced that the resource transfers to Africa had been insufficient to generate self-sustaining economic growth. At the same time, they were not prepared to increase metropolitan financial commitments. Cost-benefit analyses clearly pointed towards decolonization and African independence. As elsewhere, investments in the Office du Niger dried up.³⁵ In the run-up to Mali's independence, a team of French consultants prepared a report that could be read in two ways: as a scathing indictment of past failures and missed obligations or as a list of

33 C. Pessis, The tractor as a tool of development? The mythologies and legacies of mechanized tropical agriculture in French Africa, 1944-56, in: Hodge, Hödl and Kopf, (eds.), *Developing Africa*, pp. 179-203; J. C. Wilde, *Experiences with Agricultural Development in Tropical Africa*, vol. 2: The Case Studies, Baltimore 1967, p. 282;

34 Beusekom, *Disjunctures in Theory and Practice*, p. 95; J.C. Wilde, *Experiences with Agricultural Development in Tropical Africa*, vol.1, *The Synthesis*, Baltimore 1967, pp. 247-251, 253.

35 F. Cooper, *Possibilities and Constraint: African Independence in Historical Perspective*, in: *Journal of African History* 49 (2008), pp. 167-96.

urgent recommendations. Either way, the French bequeathed to the new government of independent Mali a development scheme which in many ways was deficient and in need of massive future investments.³⁶

The Postcolonial Period: Continuities and Alternative Visions of Production

Continuities rather than change characterized economic conditions in the immediate post-independence period in West Africa. A case in point was the Office du Niger. It remained a parastatal, now owned by the state of Mali.³⁷ Leading positions were filled with Malians, and the technocratic-paternalistic habitus of the management did not change much.³⁸ The largely French-educated and urban African management personnel were convinced of the need for technocratic planning and regarded settlers as ‘backwards’. Modernization could only succeed if the ‘indigenous’, ‘traditional’ sector were transformed as swiftly as possible into a part of the ‘modern’ economy. Whether from a capitalist or a socialist perspective, ‘modernizers’ placed high emphasis on export-oriented cash crops; small farmers were regarded as obstacles to ‘modernization’ and should be taxed as much as possible to provide the funds for ‘modernization’.³⁹ For the new Malian government, which called itself socialist and ruled until a military coup in 1968, the Office du Niger provided an ideal space to turn socialist development concepts into reality. During the 1960s, the Office received around 11 percent of all national investments. Once a Malian director, Samba Lamine Traoré, took over, the Office du Niger partially collectivized. By 1968, around 50 percent of the land was worked by salaried laborers. Cooperatives were reorganized and politicized. The Office was to demonstrate, as Traoré argued, “the superiority and modernity of collectivised agriculture”.⁴⁰ Next to the Malian state, international donors became involved in the Office du Niger. France provided some technical assistance, also via the newly established European Economic Community, whose development wing was dominated by former French colonial officials.⁴¹ The Soviet Union provided a loan and sent twenty technicians, and the People’s

36 The commission suggested streamlining the administration, strengthening the rights of rural cooperatives, providing settlers with long-term lease contracts, and improving the irrigation system. Living conditions and living standards were judged to be insufficient. République du Mali, Ministère de l’Economie Rurale et du Plan, *La Modernisation Rurale Dans La Haute-Vallée du Niger*. Mission Leynaud-Roblot, Paris 1960. Unpublished manuscript; a copy is available in the Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

37 F. Cooper, *Citizenship between Empire and the Nation. Remaking France and French Africa, 1945–1960*, Princeton 2014, pp. 332–340, 398–413.

38 A similar observation can be made for independent Tanzania and other countries. See H. Büschel, *Hilfe zur Selbsthilfe. Deutsche Entwicklungsarbeit in Afrika 1960–1975*, Frankfurt 2014, 204–226.

39 W. A. Lewis, Economic development with unlimited supply of labour, in: *The Manchester School* 22 (1954), pp. 139–191; Tignor, W. Arthur Lewis, pp. 79–108; H.W. Arndt, *Economic Development. The History of an Idea*, Chicago 1987, 49–87.

40 Quoted in W. I. Jones, *Planning and Economic Policy. Socialist Mali and Her Neighbors*, Washington 1976, p. 305. See also Schreyer, *L’Office du Niger*, pp. 222–277.

41 V. Dimier, *The Invention of a European Development Aid Bureaucracy. Recycling Empire*, Basingstoke 2014, pp. 22–42.

Republic of China, which was regarded as a model of agricultural development for many African governments during the 1960s, sent agricultural specialists who experimented with transplanted rice.⁴² This technique, used widely in Asian rice economies, increased yields dramatically, but it was labor-intensive and ultimately not accepted because it diverted too much time from growing vegetables for home consumption. International assistance and national efforts could not strengthen the economic viability of the Office or ameliorate the plight of the settlers. At the end of the 1960s, rice yields per hectare were on average lower than during the 1950s (1.5 tons per hectare), and the production of cotton, promoted by the socialist government, was abandoned altogether. As a World Bank team commissioned to study African agriculture remarked in 1967: “The checkered history of the Office du Niger and the very limited output achieved after more than three decades of trial and error and the investment of substantial capital illustrate many of the pitfalls of planning and managing a large-scale scheme of this kind”.⁴³

The new leaders who came to power after the military coup of 1968 abandoned socialism and collectivization anyway. What would have happened to the Office du Niger without the tragedy of a prolonged drought in the Sahel zone in the early 1970s remains uncertain as the military government did not have a viable development strategy.⁴⁴ Due to the drought, though, many peasants decided to apply for settlement in the Office, whose population increased from 30,000 to 50,000 between the late 1960s and 1974. Rice production also increased, from 40,000 to 90,000 tons between 1968 and 1977. Yields per hectare also saw an increase (to 2.5 tons per hectare).⁴⁵

While production increased significantly, living conditions had not changed markedly since the late 1940s. Settlers did not own the land and could not pass it on to family members. Commonly, contracts were concluded orally, and settlers customarily faced eviction in the event that they could not pay the water fees. Crops still had to be sold to the Office du Niger at fixed prices that, during the 1960s and 1970s, were usually below market prices. This was a regular practice throughout Africa, as governments subsidized food for urban dwellers. Security forces tried to make sure that settlers actually sold their crops to the Office. Often enough, though, they preyed upon the settlers. Daily life in the Office du Niger was determined by coercion, structural violence, poverty, and poor access to social services. During the mid-1970s, the annual per capita income did not exceed around \$105 per year. That reflected the national average, but given the extensive investments undertaken in the past, incomes in the Office du Niger were disappointing. There were only very few schools and health centers, and the literacy rate did not exceed

42 Declassified Documents Reference System, Central Intelligence Agency, Economic Intelligence Committee, *Aid and Trade Activities of Communist Countries in Less Developed Areas of the Free World*, 1 January – 30 June 1964, doc. no. CK3100507403; Mary Martin to John C. de Wilde, Mali – External Debt, 5.6.1970, World Bank Archives (WBA), Folder 1691370.

43 De Wilde, *Experiences with Agricultural Development*, vol. 1, p. 72 and vol. 2, p. 270. Quote in vol. 2, p. 287.

44 Human and natural factors were responsible for the droughts, and famine, of the 1970s and 1980s. One reason was desertification due to poor land management, deforestation, and overgrazing. Since the 1990s, climate change was identified as a major cause.

45 D. Aw and G. Diemer, *Making a Large Irrigation Scheme Work. A Case Study from Mali*, Washington, D.C. 2005, p. 13.

5 percent.⁴⁶ Well into the 1980s, many settlers lived in a state of debt peonage. Given these conditions, settlers tried to circumvent the official economy as much as possible. Irrigation schemes were manipulated, part of the crop withheld, and machinery loaned from the Office not well maintained.⁴⁷

What had emerged slowly since independence was strikingly obvious by the mid-1970s: Mali had become dependent on external development assistance. Public investments were financed by development agencies from Europe, the Soviet Union and China; debts increased dramatically and rapidly. The Malian government – like most other governments in sub-Saharan Africa – continued to support public agricultural production, marketing boards and parastatals, despite being aware of their low productivity and high financial needs. Support for the urban population (in the 1980s around 20 percent of Mali's population) in the form of subsidized food remained a political priority. This 'urban bias' reflected deep-seated stereotypes about rural populations prone to 'tradition' and resistance to change. Much more than a question of developmentalist attitudes, this bias reflected security concerns. Urban populations could influence or disrupt fragile public administrations and weak governments much easier than rural dwellers; subsidized food for consumers thus received a clear priority over decent prices for producers.

The Rediscovery of Agriculture

The severe drought, and subsequent famine, in the Sahel zone in the early 1970s tragically confirmed the need for a strategic realignment in agrarian development doctrines and practices. Since the 1940s, agriculture and rural development had played only a subsidiary role in the emerging development industry. Development economists such as W. Arthur Lewis, Raúl Prebisch or Walt Rostow, to name only three prominent ones, had accorded agriculture only little developmentalist potential, apart from its function as provider of capital (through taxes) for industrialization. Dutch and British agricultural and rural development initiatives of the interwar period had, on the whole, not been continued by post-independence governments, with the exception of large-scale schemes. Apart from the Food and Agriculture Organization, large international organizations such as the World Bank or other specialized agencies of the United Nations had not paid much attention to agriculture and rural development.⁴⁸ With the exception of the plantation sector, agriculture was regarded as 'pre-modern' and 'traditional'; peas-

46 World Bank Report and Recommendation of the President of the International Development Association to the Executive Directors on a Proposed Credit to the Republic of Mali for an Office du Niger Technical Assistance/Engineering Report, Washington, DC, 27 September 1978, World Bank Online Archive Report No. P-2387-MLI, 1, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/pt/411811468278722067/pdf/multi-page.pdf> (accessed 26 February 2017)

47 R. J. Bingen, *Food Production and Rural Development in the Sahel. Lessons from Mali's Operation Riz-Segou*, Boulder, CO 1985, p. 118.

48 Hodge, *Triumph of the Expert*, pp. 144-178. D. Kapur, J. P. Lewis and R. Webb, *The World Bank. Its First Half Century*, vol.1, Washington 1997, pp. 109-119; Moon, *Technology and Ethical Idealism*, pp. 92-140.

ants were subsistence-oriented, backwards, and unable to and disinterested in integrating themselves in the modern monetarized economy, the only sphere within which development, national development, could take place.

This changed slowly in the 1960s, when it became apparent that the ‘development decade’, optimistically pronounced by the UN General Assembly in 1960, would not fulfill the high expectations countries and peoples associated with it. Certainly, the Green Revolution seemed to usher in a new era of high agricultural productivity based on the application of science and the introduction of high-yield varieties, fertilizers, pesticides and a range of other interventions. However, its impact was not dramatized until Norman Borlaug, a prominent scientist, received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1970. Moreover, the Green Revolution focused on Asia and not on Africa.⁴⁹

From a theoretical angle, agriculture also received more attention. Most notably, Bruce F. Johnston and John W. Mellor published their important article “The Role of Agriculture in Economic Development” in 1961. They argued that the dichotomy between industrial and agricultural development was problematic, and that small-farm agriculture could contribute to economic growth in a substantial way. The solution was a more efficient use of resources in the agricultural sector, and a better integration and transfer of technology.⁵⁰ This position was supported by Theodore W. Schultz, who, in his book *Transforming Traditional Agriculture* (1964) argued that agriculture was central to the development of ‘underdeveloped’ countries, and that it had to be modernized with the help of technology.⁵¹ According to these authors, peasants were not ‘traditional’ or ‘backward’ people. Instead, they needed to be seen as petty capitalists eager to promote their individual well-being. At the World Bank, President George Woods (1963–1968), influenced by these authors, accorded agriculture a greater role in development and increased bank lending towards rural and agricultural development. With the assumption of the presidency by Robert S. McNamara (1968–1981), agricultural and rural development moved to center stage at the World Bank.

Apart from theoretical reasons, strategic and political arguments played a huge role in increasing appreciation for agriculture and farmers or peasants. Most notably, experts and politicians identified global population growth as an alarming problem. Many feared a Malthusian trap: slowly increasing food production had to cope with a swiftly grow-

49 C. R. Unger, India’s Green Revolution: Towards a New Historical Perspective, in: *South Asia Chronicle* 4 (2014), pp. 253–70. See also L. Brown, *Seeds of Change: The Green Revolution and Development in the 1970s*, London 1970; H. M. Cleaver, *The Origins of the Green Revolution*, Ann Arbor, MI 1975; N. Cullather, *The Hungry World: America’s Cold War Battle Against Poverty in Asia*, Cambridge, MA 2011; K. A. Dahlberg, *Beyond the Green Revolution. The Ecology and the Politics of Global Agricultural Development*, New York, 1979; F. Frankel, *India’s Green Revolution. Economic Gains and Political Costs*, Princeton 1971; J. Harwood, *Has the Green Revolution been a Cumulative Learning Process?*, in: *Third World Quarterly* 34.3 (2013), pp. 397–404. J. H. Perkins, *Geopolitics and the Green Revolution: Wheat, Genes, and the Cold War*, New York 1997; V. Shiva, *The Violence of the Green Revolution. Third World Agriculture, Ecology and Politics*, London 1991.

50 B. F. Johnston and J. W. Mellor, *The Role of Agriculture in Economic Development*, in: *The American Economic Review* 51.4 (1961), pp. 566–593.

51 Th. W. Schultz, *Transforming Traditional Agriculture*, New Haven, CT 1964.

ing population in the Global South.⁵² This scenario seemed particularly dramatic in Southern Asia and in Sub-Saharan Africa. Since the early 1970s, therefore, the World Bank and other development outfits provided loans and expertise to support smaller farmers and rural areas. The primary aim was to increase food production, but how this could best be promoted remained unclear. Was it sufficient to provide new seeds and fertilizers? Should the focus be on infrastructure or on the construction of schools and health centers? The World Bank and other donors experimented with a range of technical interventions. Projects were somewhat eclectically identified, in many cases based on propositions from recipient countries which looked more like wish lists than like proper development plans. Lending operations towards rural development by the World Bank alone increased by 13.5 percent annually during the 1970s, from a total of \$1.5 billion in 1970 to \$5.3 billion in 1980.⁵³ In Mali alone, the World Bank funded ten projects to the amount of \$144 million between 1972 and 1977 in such diverse fields as rice production, education, communication, livestock and infrastructure.⁵⁴

The Office du Niger had until then not benefited from these huge investments. The irrigation system was deemed too expensive, the administration inflated, the Office du Niger unprofitable.⁵⁵ In other words: the Office du Niger was a hopeless white elephant. Nevertheless, as is not uncommon with 'high modernist designs', to use James Scott's famous concept, Bank analysts were fully aware that the irrigation system existed, that enormous investments had already been undertaken and that large numbers of settlers had arrived since the drought of the early 1970s.⁵⁶ As World Bank official Claude Blanchi put it: "The Office du Niger is here to stay, because of its size, its production potential, its economic and financial weight".⁵⁷

The Politics of Technocracy

In the late 1970s, World Bank staff must have felt confused. McNamara's expansion of the rural and agricultural development sector meant that the institution had become more pro-active than ever in its search for projects. In addition, a major housing initiative for urban areas supplemented the range of interventions in the agricultural sector. On top of all this, the 'basic needs' approach was being debated and gender as a category of development began its creeping entry into discussions within the various departments

52 M. Connelly, *Fatal Misconception. The Struggle to Control World Population*, Cambridge, MA 2009, pp. 237-275; M. Frey, *Neo-Malthusianism and development: shifting interpretations of a contested paradigm*, in: *Journal of Global History* 6 (2011), pp. 75-97.

53 Kapur, Lewis and Webb, *World Bank*, vol. 1, 398.

54 World Bank Report and Recommendation of the President, 27 September 1978, Report No. P-2387-MLI. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/877211468049786388/pdf/multi-page.pdf> (accessed 27 February 2017).

55 Ibid, 11. See also Schreyger, *L'Office du Niger*, pp. 283-284.

56 Scott, *Seeing Like a State*.

57 C. Blanchi to D. Alisbah and S. El Darwish, *Mali: Office du Niger. A proposal for immediate action*, 22 April 1983, WBA, Folder 807349.

of the Bank, but it remained unclear how to operationalize them.⁵⁸ Given the need to identify projects, and in view of the doctrinal uncertainties, it is not surprising that the Bank sent an initial appraisal mission to the Office du Niger, a project that, in the Bank's previous assessments, had not had sufficient potential for financial returns.⁵⁹ An international conference of donors held in Ségou, the administrative headquarter of the Office du Niger, envisaged \$43 million dollars for the rehabilitation of the project in late 1978.⁶⁰ This conference marked the beginning of a decades-long process of coordinated assistance, coercion and planning which continues until today.

By the time the World Bank committed itself to supporting the Office du Niger, important developments in the international political economy affected future strategies and lending policies of the Bank. The Iranian Revolution led to a further rise in oil prices, putting enormous pressure on oil-importing developing countries and on debt-servicing. Partly as a result of increasing oil prices, growth rates in so-called developed countries remained flat. In Great Britain and the United States, conservative governments took over and crusaded against state involvement in the economy. These developments reinforced a reconsideration of past lending practices within the Bank, where dissatisfaction with the sluggish impact of rural and agricultural development projects on national growth rates had been accumulating. The result of these deliberations was the famous Berg Report of 1981. It blamed African governments for past failures in agricultural production and continued rural poverty, rather than colonial legacies or the externalities of the world market. It called for market-oriented trade and exchange rate policies, and for improved public policies in general and agricultural policies in particular.⁶¹ The report reinforced a new direction in Bank lending practices in two important ways: the so-called 'structural adjustment loans' called for continuous monitoring of overall development aims beyond the more circumscribed project levels, and were designed to not only fund certain projects but improve the political economy and the institutional structure of a recipient country. Conditions were not a novel phenomenon in development assistance, but the new conditionality of 'structural adjustment' demanded a more forceful regime of monitoring and compliance, a regime which in fact infringed heavily on the sovereignty of countries and the independence of national decision-making by interfering with their

58 E. V. K. Jaycox to W. C. Baum, Action Program and Interim Report of Urban Poverty Task Group, 23 October 1975, WBA, Folder 30146442; Jaycox to R. S. McNamara, Urban Poverty Program Status Report, 17 January 1979, WBA, Folder 30146462. With the assistance of the World Bank and the UNDP, the International Labor Organization in 1976 issued a report that defined basic needs as food, clothing, housing, education, and public transportation. While consisting of diverse people across several continents, the dependent variable to categorize small farmers, tenants and the landless as a "specific group of people" was "poverty", defined as the "equivalent of an annual per capita income of 50 USD or less". See World Bank, Rural Development. Sector Policy Paper, February 1975, Washington 1975, pp. 3-4.

59 R. Chaufourrier to Files, Office Memo, Mali, Minister of Finance's Visit to Mr. McNamara, 17 December 1968, WBA, Folder 807346; M. Pajmans, Memo for the Record, Mali, Delegation's Visit to Mr. McNamara (Agricultural Credit), 1 May 1970, WBA, Folder 807346.

60 Schreyger, *L'Office du Niger*, p. 336.

61 World Bank, *Accelerated Development in Sub-Saharan Africa – An Agenda for Action* of the World Bank, Washington 1981, p. 5; See also Kapur, Lewis and Webb, *The World Bank*, vol. 1, pp. 505-510.

public spending and the organizational set-up of their governmental structures. The Office du Niger constituted an excellent case for the implementation of these new market-oriented, coercive development doctrines and practices. As a World Bank official stated in 1983, “rehabilitation of Office Niger implies that Government and ON will depart from policies and procedures applied for many years”.⁶²

From the perspective of Washington, the Office du Niger symbolized much that had gone wrong with African agriculture in the past. The state-run public enterprise (parastatal) had accumulated, over the past decade, a large but underemployed staff (around 10,000 for a total settler population of 60,000 in the early 1980s), crippling debts, and monopolies on the buying, at well-below market prices, processing and marketing of the farmers’ harvests.⁶³ Relations between the Office as an institution and the farmers were of a highly coercive nature, as a World Bank official noted: “Socio-economic studies carried out in 1980 and 1981 have caused shockwaves in the Office establishment by highlighting well known issues that no one has dared to put into print before. They revolve around security of land tenure, removing police controls on marketing of paddy, changing the paternalistic nature of cooperatives, improving the appalling nutrition, water supply and health situation, and priority to functional literacy.”⁶⁴

By the mid-1980s, structural adjustment loans in the agricultural sector made up around 30 percent of Bank lending. Because of poor economic conditions, high debts, and the reluctance of donors to commit themselves in the future, the Malian government had not much choice but to seek the loan the World Bank offered. Other donors such as Dutch, West German and French development outfits had signed up to the Bank’s policy and accepted its overall coordination. Deteriorating irrigation conditions within the Office du Niger and further decreases in production made rehabilitation of the area a national priority. It was in this context that the Bank was able to dictate conditions which preceded the conclusion of a loan agreement: lay-offs of administrative and supportive staff, an end to the marketing monopoly, a ‘professionalization’ of management (along with the acceptance of temporary external advisers), a new accounting system, an increase in water fees, and more responsibility, and freedom, for individual entrepreneurial activity on the part of the settlers.⁶⁵

In the first few years after the signing of an initial loan agreement in 1989 between the Bank and the Government of Mali, as well as between Mali and donor institutions from

62 C. Blanchi to Files, Office du Niger (ON), Discussion with Malian Delegation in Washington, 28 February 1983, WBA, Folder 807349.

63 C. Blanchi to D. Alisbah, Mali – Office du Niger. A proposal for immediate action, 22 April 1983, WBA, Folder 807349. See also R. Paarlberg and M. Lipton, Changing Missions at the World Bank, in: *World Policy Journal* 8.3 (1991), pp. 475-498, here p. 488; Van de Walle, *African Economies*, p. 142.

64 J. Tillier to A.D. Knox, Mali – Office du Niger Irrigation Improvement of Farmers Situation, 11 December 1981, WBA, Folder 807347.

65 D. Lallement to J. Guillot-Lageat, “Office du Niger Consolidation Project – Updated Project Brief”, 18 May 1984, WBA, Folder 807350, and Lallement to Guillot-Lageat, Office du Niger – Appraisal Mission. Back-to-Office Report/Debriefing, 05 August 1986, WBA, Folder 807353.

West Germany, the Netherlands, and France, reform proceeded slowly.⁶⁶ The government was reluctant to give up institutional controls and relax market restrictions favoring urban food consumers to the detriment of rural producers.⁶⁷ However, continuing financial problems and low productivity within the Office du Niger, as well as the ever-growing demands from donors and the global economy to liberalize domestic markets, forced the Malian government and the Office du Niger to comply with many the donor's prescriptions. These concerned three major areas: institutional reforms, increased productivity, and social reforms. Taken together, they transformed the role of the state and of authorities in the Office du Niger, the economic potential of the irrigation scheme, and the life of the settlers.

'Structural adjustment', often described as a ruthless instrument which enforced alien norms, infringing upon national sovereignty, and impoverished African urban dwellers, reflected the liberal agenda of the 1980s and 1990s.⁶⁸ It sought to liberalize markets and raise productivity. At the same time, it enhanced, perhaps for the first time in the history of twentieth-century development doctrines, the role and position of the individual. Human rights and gender assumed increasing importance, though critics argue that this emphasis was more rhetorical than substantial.⁶⁹ 'Structural adjustment' therefore seemed a double-edged sword and a contradictory mechanism for promoting liberal capitalism: it exposed societies, more than ever before, to the vagaries of the market; at the same time, it opened up opportunities for individuals to act as market participants.⁷⁰

The Liberal Agenda and its Impact on the Office du Niger

Between the 1950s and the 1980s, settlers' living standards had improved, if only very slowly, but fundamental imperatives of production had not changed markedly. The Malian government and the management of the Office du Niger still placed an absolute emphasis on the production of rice, to the detriment of a diversified smallholder economy which allowed families, mainly women, to grow vegetables or raise chickens to sell in local markets. Hunger remained a pervasive threat to many of the poorer settlers. Written land contracts and long-term leases did not exist, and collectively the settlers still formed the labor factor in a development scheme that was organized along agro-industrial cri-

66 Memorandum and Recommendation of the President of the International Development Association to the Executive Directors on a Proposed Credit to the Republic of Mali for the Office du Niger Consolidation Project, 08.02.1988, Report No. P-4744-MLI, http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/IW3P/IB/1988/02/08/000009265_3960926203647/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf (accessed 26 February 2017).

67 For a similar case concerning Kenya, see Van de Walle, *African Economies*, p. 158.

68 J. Harrington and P. Mosley, *Evaluating the Impact of World Bank Structural Adjustment Lending: 1980-87*, in: *Journal of Development Studies* 27.3 (1991), pp. 63-94.

69 M. R. Abouharb and D. L. Cingranelli, *The Human Rights Effects of World Bank Structural Adjustment, 1981-2000*, in: *International Studies Quarterly* 50 (2006), pp. 233-262.

70 H. Bernstein, *Structural Adjustment and African Agriculture. A Retrospect*, in: D. Moore (ed.), *The World Bank. Development, Poverty, Hegemony*, Scottsville 2007, pp. 343-368.

teria. Not for nothing did a farmer interviewed in the late 1980s declare: “Our country has been free since 1960, but we farmers in the Office du Niger are still the agency’s slaves”.⁷¹

The liberal reforms of the 1990s and the early 2000s witnessed a fundamental overhaul of the institutional structure of the Office du Niger. Coordinated by the World Bank, Dutch, French, and West German donor agencies as well as the European Union bankrolled the rehabilitation of the irrigation system, financed schools and medical centers, drilled wells, and supported a range of cooperatives and associations designed to turn settlers into ‘stakeholders’. In the process, about three hundred million dollars were disbursed, three times more than initially expected. An elected Malian government, in office since the democratization of 1991/92, supported the rehabilitation. In line with the then current development doctrine, donors and recipient subscribed to the notion of ‘good government’ and the importance of functionally specific institutions designed to assist freer trade and open markets.⁷² In the process, the Office du Niger lost many of its functions, most notably its right to buy, process and market the rice, and much of its personnel. Some 5,000 employees lost their jobs, many of them buying long-term leases with the compensation they had received. The organization confined its responsibilities to the distribution and administration of the irrigated land, the maintenance of the larger canals (primary and secondary), and to agricultural extension services. Maintenance of the tertiary irrigation system, the small canals watering the fields, became the responsibility of cooperatives.⁷³

Downsizing of the Office and de-regulation of the agrarian sector of Mali have brought rising standards of living to two-thirds of the settlers. As a World Bank study noted in 2005: “Between 1982 and 2002, rice yields have quadrupled, total production has increased sixfold, incomes have increased dramatically while supporting a four-times-larger population, agriculture has diversified, cropping intensities have increased, and food security has improved.”⁷⁴ The ultimate aims of the reform process seem to have been realized: productivity has increased tremendously, poverty, in terms of income, has been reduced. In social terms, perhaps the two most important consequences were an increase in security and access of women to income. For instance, rising incomes and more secure leases of land to settlers have made longer-term planning more dependable and increased school enrollment. Deregulation offered women the opportunity to sell surplus produce, especially vegetables, in local markets. While land tenure is still a male prerogative, independent incomes provide women with more choices and freedoms.⁷⁵

71 Aw and Diemer, *Making a Large Irrigation Scheme Work*, 1.

72 D. North, *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance*, Cambridge 1990.

73 Aw and Diemer, *Making a Large Irrigation Scheme Work*, 21-64.

74 *Ibid.*, xi.

75 See, for instance a report by the German Kreditanstalt fuer Wiederaufbau from 2005. https://www.kfw-entwicklungsbank.de/Evaluierung/Ergebnisse-und-Publikationen/PDF-Dokumente-L-P/Mali_Office_Niger_2005.pdf (accessed 10 February 2017)

Doubts about privatization and downsizing of the institution remain. Over the last three decades, the government of Mali has successively reduced, or terminated, its commitment to rural development, rural health and rural social policies. Donors have in fact assumed responsibility for a central element of the irrigation system: the maintenance of the Markala dam and the major canals.⁷⁶ Donors have also vigorously promoted the establishment of settler cooperatives. While they have regarded this move as an empowerment of rural civil society, critics argue that social pressure amongst the settlers and cooperative debt vis-à-vis the Office du Niger have increased.⁷⁷ Perhaps the single most important threat to individual and family security is land rights, which the Office du Niger continues to control.⁷⁸ Eviction in case of non-compliance with institutional regulations remains possible and is being executed, as a village headman told the *New York Times* in December 2010: “They told us this would be the last rainy season for us to cultivate our fields; after that, they will level all the houses and take the land”.⁷⁹ Foreign governments and companies have discovered the area and invested many millions of dollars in large-scale agribusinesses on land lease terms much more favorable than small farmers have ever obtained.⁸⁰ If ‘land grabbing’ is the future of privatization and liberalization, then many small farmers might face an uncertain future, a future which could resemble in many ways the colonial past.

Conclusion

The colonial government, the postcolonial state of Mali, the international donor community, and, last but not least, the settlers themselves have invested about a billion dollars in the Office du Niger over a period of almost a hundred years.⁸¹ From modest beginnings in the 1930s, the scheme provides the livelihoods for more than a 130,000 settlers today. As a hundred years ago, expectations are high. Productivity can only be realized in top-down decision processes and with substantial inputs and interventions. Most settlers no longer live under conditions of debt peonage, but they are still, to a sig-

76 For an exploration of this argument in general, see Ch. Piot, *Nostalgia for the Future. West Africa after the Cold War*, Chicago 2010, pp.133-162.

77 F. Brondeau, ‘Un ‘grenier pour l’Afrique de l’Ouest’? Enjeux économiques et perspectives de développement dans les systèmes irrigués de l’Office du Niger (Mali)’, in: *Géocarrefour* 84 (2009), pp. 43-53.

78 For a historically informed assessment, see P.E. Peters, *Conflicts over Land and Threats to Customary Tenure in Africa*, in: *African Affairs* 112 (2013), pp. 543-562.

79 *New York Times*, 21 December 2010.

80 The current state of affairs is unclear and clouded in secrecy. Chinese companies seem active, as was (or is) the government of Libya. The latter invested more than 50 million dollars in areas on and around the Office du Niger prior to the war against Libyan dictator Gadhafi. See *Le Monde Diplomatique*, 9 September 2011. <http://www.monde-diplomatique.de/pm/2011/09/09.mondeText.artikel,a0055.idx,17> (accessed 25 February 2017) and *Afrique-Europe-Interact*, *Land Grabbing, Migration, Widerstand, Analysen und Interviews zu Landkonflikten in Mali*, Bremen 2012. https://afrique-europe-interact.net/files/aei_brosch__re_anfang-1.pdf (accessed 26 February 2017).

81 The latest large investment took place in 2010. See World Bank, *Others Provide US\$160 Million to Boost Agriculture in Mali*, 3 June 2010, World Bank Press Release No. 2010/453/AFR, <http://go.worldbank.org/9QTDTHCOX0> (accessed 27 February 2017).

nificant extent, at the mercy of agro-industrial planning. As long as the threat of eviction exists, structural violence as a constitutive factor of daily life is still a characteristic feature in the Office du Niger, though the degree has lessened over time. A critical feature of individual security, namely long-term lease contracts, are still not available. Decades have passed since settlers' knowledge of the land and of farming methods were considered inherently inferior, but the distribution of land, seeds, water and communal tasks still sets limits on individual choices.

Development doctrines have deeply influenced the institution. From the colonial paradigm of production to visions of a socialist rural economy to the liberal predicaments of the post-1980 period, external doctrines have left a deep imprint on the Office du Niger and its settlers. As has been shown above, the colonial vision of *mise en valeur*, promulgated as a win-win situation for local and metropolitan interests alike, turned out to be, in practice, a labor site operating with false promises, involuntary labor and vastly unrealistic expectations.⁸² The post-World War II period concretized the metropolitan aim of consolidating the colonial empire. Further investments and mechanization epitomized the paradigm of productivity in the interest of the metropole. Decolonization bequeathed plans and visions rather than functioning systems to the independent government of Mali. More than anything else, a man-made and natural catastrophe, the drought in the Sahel in the early 1970s, provided the backdrop to new departures in agrarian development on the ground. This was facilitated by a reconfiguration of knowledge and practical advice on agriculture, farmers, and the rural space during the 1960s. The new appreciation for small-scale farmers in the development doctrines of the 1960s and its realization in practices in the 1970s affected the Office du Niger at a time when the institution was, for all practical purposes, no longer sustainable.

A consistent thread that runs through the history of the Office du Niger is cooperatives. The French introduced them for the dual purpose of providing tools and machines as well as to enhance social control. Under the guise of a return to customary (or 'traditional', as it was called) forms of communal burden-sharing, the urban socialists of the 1960s politicized cooperatives. They became instruments of political mobilization but lost their economic functions. Cooperatives imposed by foreign donors since the 1980s assumed, again, economic functions, but social control and collective accountability have been prominent features of top-down institution building. As such, there is a high degree of continuity from the colonial period up until the present.

While the reforms of the Office du Niger since the late 1970s ensured its survival, and raised attractiveness and productivity, donors in particular were unable to alter the most critical issue affecting settler's lives, namely tenure arrangements. That foreign investors today get better deals than the settlers raises questions about the ultimate aim of development schemes. More often than not concerns about social or ecological emphases give way to the established focus on productivity.

82 The parallels to another large irrigation scheme, the Gezira scheme in Sudan, during the colonial period are striking. See Ertsen, *Improvising Planned Development*, pp. 7-60.