

BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE BY D'A26

Regional governance

1. Plurality of local authorities and sources of legitimacy

Local authorities may derive from the state, custom, religion, or even projects (which create ad hoc norms) (Rangé et al., 2024). They may be either individual actors (such as traditional or spiritual leaders) or collective bodies (such as resource management committees or citizens' assemblies). They may be formal (officially recognised by the state, such as town halls or decentralised state agencies, for example) or informal (customary chiefs not officially recognised by the state, religious or spiritual leaders, etc.).

According to Colin et al. (2023), local authorities vary 'depending on the types of rights and issues: head of the family, family council, village chief, landowner, sovereign, religious authority, state officials, local elected representatives, territorial administration, the judiciary, etc. Contexts of plural norms often coincide with a plurality of authorities, drawing on different sources of legitimacy: customary powers, religious authorities, state actors.'

Local authorities do indeed derive their legitimacy from various sources: custom, religion, law, government bodies, elections, etc. "These sources of legitimacy may be cumulative or, conversely, mutually exclusive." (Colin et al., 2023). These same authors also cite other forms of local authority in their work on rural land tenure in the Global South, namely "politicians, *big men*, community leaders, and actors without *a priori* land tenure legitimacy [who] are sometimes in a position to assert themselves in land tenure disputes. Through their ability to mobilise the administration or the courts, they may be better equipped to resolve land disputes than those for whom this is a legal responsibility. The status of the individual or organisation (being a village chief, sub-prefect, head of a land administration department, etc.) matters less than their personal power, a power reinforced by the demands placed upon them."

These different types of authorities—state, customary, formal, informal, etc.—coexist and often interact, shaping and complicating the landscape of **local governance**¹. The effectiveness and nature of local governance often depend on the interaction (and, at times, the conflict) between these two systems.

1.1. Public bodies

These are bodies officially recognised by the state and governed by laws or regulations. They have a legal mandate to exercise power. This type of official local authority is generally part of the state's administrative and political framework. According to Allex-Billaud (2014), they can be defined as 'the administrative body of a local government or a territorial authority (a concept used in France). Local governments stem from a specific territorial administration and refer to all administrative divisions situated below the state level. [...] Most countries have at least one level of local government of a municipal nature. [...] Others have two or three local tiers. The most common intermediate structures are districts, provinces, regions, counties, or governorates.'

They operate either through devolution or decentralisation (Box 1). Depending on their relationship with central government, the following forms exist (Boex, 2013):

- **Deconcentrated local authorities** are territorial units of the national administration, essentially local branches of central government. They have no political autonomy and are composed of civil servants drawn from the national hierarchy. They do not have their own budget; their funding forms part of the national budget. They are headed by civil servants, such as governors, who are appointed by central government.

¹ There are many forms of governance. For West Africa, Olivier De Sardan (2004) defines governance as "the set of processes involved in the provision and delivery of public goods and services, not only by official state bodies, but also by other actors, such as development institutions, patrons or the voluntary sector, which sometimes supplement the state, sometimes replace it, or sometimes support it".

- **Decentralised local authorities** are legally distinct legal entities with their own elected political leaders. Their responsibilities are defined by law. However, they possess a degree of autonomy in the management of their affairs. They have the power to own assets, carry out financial transactions and may sue or be sued in their own name. They prepare and approve their own budgets, independently of the higher level of government.

Despite significant differences between regions, they are the main bodies responsible for the socio-economic development of their local areas. They are responsible for developing and implementing local development policies, in line with the government's broad guidelines and with the support of government departments. They play a crucial role in local governance, addressing the specific needs of communities through administrative, political and social frameworks. They organise and ensure the functioning of public services within their territory in accordance with the law that allocates areas of responsibility to the various levels of government. They are responsible for a wide range of local public services: education, health, environmental management, urban planning, as well as the provision of public services (Rangeon, 1996; Allex-Billaud, 2014). Certain powers are predominantly held by a decentralised level². However, certain areas of competence may be shared between different local authorities and/or between them and the State, which requires a clearly defined coordination between these different levels. Furthermore, territorial organisation and the distribution of powers between local authorities are not necessarily clear everywhere in the world (Allex-Billaud, 2014).

Box 1. Decentralisation, deconcentration, delegation and devolution

Decentralisation 'encompasses a range of different institutional organisational models, both in theory and in practice. The constraints and responsibilities of decentralised entities, as well as the benefits and risks of decentralisation, differ depending on the model chosen and on the implementation or evolution of the process. According to Wolman [1990], **decentralisation** is the distribution of power from the centre to local authorities. It is a system for transferring responsibility for planning, management, and the collection and allocation of resources from central government to local or regional authorities. The term therefore covers a range of intergovernmental relationships that are more or less binding on the central government and/or the decentralised entity.

Deconcentration is an administrative technique for the devolution of management, consisting of transferring the power to take certain decisions to local representatives of the central government, who remain subject to central hierarchical authority. The central government retains its powers and responsibilities for a specific function, but has this function carried out outside the capital through its regional branches or offices. The central bodies remain responsible for the general direction, coordination and supervision of the deconcentrated bodies, as well as for specific matters for which powers are assigned to them by special provisions. As for the decentralised bodies, they enjoy the presumption of competence, insofar as they have the general decision-making over the affairs of their constituencies. In a system of decentralisation, political responsibilities are borne by national elected representatives, central government employees remain responsible for implementation, and the national budget provides the funding.

Delegation involves making decentralised entities agents of the central government that perform certain functions on behalf of the central government. The latter retains its responsibilities and powers, but delegates the provision and administration of services to a local government that is accountable to it. Nationally elected representatives and local elected representatives are therefore the political decision-makers; local government employees, supervised by those of the central government, are responsible for implementation; funding is provided by the local budget, with or without contractual payments from the central government drawn from the national budget. According to Bolderson and Mabbet [1998], the delegation of powers improves the efficiency of service administration and enables a degree of autonomy in the provision of delegated services where the necessary funds are available at local level.

Devolution implies that decentralised entities have the responsibility and power to decide what is done in a local area of activity. It consists of having local affairs managed by the decentralised entity, which in this case has its own legal personality and is not situated in a hierarchical relationship with the central government. Unlike the other two forms of decentralisation, only local elected representatives are the political decision-makers in a devolution system. Furthermore, local government employees and national civil service bodies are responsible for implementation; the funding of local activities is provided by the local budget, through taxes or transfers from the central government drawn from the national budget.

In sub-Saharan African countries, reforms are characterised by a dual process of devolution and deconcentration. The creation of local authorities with legal personality and financial autonomy is accompanied by a process of deconcentration of state services, which takes the form of new administrative divisions of the territory and/or the revitalisation of existing administrative divisions. The powers transferred to local authorities cover the economic and social spheres, administration, spatial planning, the environment, education and health. In terms of economic development and planning, decentralised authorities are responsible for formulating and

² In France, for example, local authorities have 'control over land use' and therefore possess numerous powers in the field of urban planning (issuing building permits, drafting local urban development plans, etc.), departments play a leading role in the health and social sector (distribution of the RSA, child welfare, etc.) and regions have significant powers in the areas of the economy and development (vocational training, etc.) (Allex-Billaud, 2014).

implementing their development policies in accordance with the State's broad guidelines and with the support of State services. They are therefore responsible for undertaking public initiatives aimed at improving the living conditions of local populations." Source: Zerbo, 2008

1.2. Traditional, customary, religious and other local authorities

This category includes actors who are not institutionalised by the state but who possess social, cultural or community legitimacy. Their power is based on local recognition, history, custom, religion, trust, etc.

Traditional or customary authorities govern communities on the basis of historical norms and practices. They derive their legitimacy from traditions, customs and community social norms rather than from official state law, although the latter may recognise them (Boex, 2013; Baldwin, 2025). They exist in various forms, and their roles and influence vary considerably across the world. They play a significant and multifaceted role in the social, political and economic spheres of citizens' lives³. Generally, they play an important role in local governance, resource management and social regulation, particularly in rural and pastoral communities. These may include individual traditional leaders, village councils, lineage councils, elders, or community organisations managing specific resources, such as traditional pastoral institutions that regulate the use of natural resources and common lands (VSF International, 2016; Rangeon, 1996).

Their roles vary considerably depending on the context, particularly their relationship with the state and their power within their communities (Baldwin, 2025). Although their power is often *de facto* and not officially recognised by the state, their influence in the governance of local communities and the management of resources is undeniable (Onibon et al., 1999). For example, 'almost all African countries have traditional authorities in one form or another. The most common structures of the traditional institution are, in order of power and authority, kings, chiefs, leaders and village heads. Due to their organisation, traditional authorities constitute the most immediate form of governance in many rural areas of the continent. They assume roles such as land allocation and management, conflict resolution (see Box 2), environmental protection, and the promotion and preservation of culture and heritage. With such roles, traditional leaders tend to interact more with rural residents than with modern state institutions. Thus, the definition of decentralisation in the African context generally includes recognition of the role played by traditional authorities in local governance.' (University of the Western Cape et al., n.d.).

Traditional authorities may operate alongside official state structures, or even, at times, be in conflict with them (Baldwin, 2025; Onibon et al., 1999). Their roles often overlap with, or even substitute for, those of the state, particularly in rural areas. Indeed, traditional authorities often represent the most immediate form of local governance in rural areas, forming a crucial link between citizens and the state, particularly where the state's presence is limited. Even today, in Africa for example, they are 'powerful and relevant, particularly in the absence of the formal state in certain areas. They therefore serve as alternative centres of power in many rural areas. [...] Whether or not their role has been officially recognised⁴, traditional chiefs often continue to serve as an important link between the state, particularly local authorities, and citizens. They provide services such as dispute resolution, land management and the coordination of responses to natural disasters, which the modern state is often unable to provide due to its limited capacity. In short, in the absence of the state, they become the *de facto* state.' (University of the Western Cape et al., n.d.).

This category also includes other hybrid or emerging forms that participate, in one way or another, in local governance: for example, NGOs, farmers' associations (Onibon et al., 1999) or opinion leaders with strong local influence but no institutional or customary recognition.

Box 2. Roles of traditional local authorities: examples
Land conflicts in Gwendégoué (central-western Burkina Faso)

³ For Africa, see Honig, 2019.

⁴ Countries take different approaches to the role of traditional authorities. In Zambia, traditional authorities are recognised in the Constitution, which also grants traditional chiefs the right to vote in local councils. In Zimbabwe, the role of traditional authorities is recognised in the Constitution and a number of traditional leaders are ex officio members of local councils, without the right to vote. A similar approach has been adopted in South Africa. (University of the Western Cape et al., n.d.).

Access to land in the rural regions of south-western Burkina Faso is often still regulated by traditional authorities, land chiefs and lineage elders. “Most land-related conflicts are largely resolved locally, without the intervention of state authorities. If one of the parties involved in the conflict does contact the prefect—a civil servant and the administrative head of a department—the latter generally avoids taking an open stance in favour of one side. Prefects are not originally from the region in which they carry out their duties. They usually remain in post for a period of two to five years and are well aware of the complexity of land-related conflicts and the explosive potential of many land disputes. This is why they seek to involve local dignitaries, heads of families, village administrative officials, and, above all, land chiefs, in the hope that they will find a solution in keeping with local norms and practices. Written documents – such as minutes – are generally not drawn up. The resolution of territorial conflicts is thus rooted in the history of settlement and local concepts governing how land and resources should be allocated. Land chiefs remain, for the time being, key figures in matters of land access in the rural regions of south-western Burkina Faso. Who are the holders of this role and how do they legitimise their position? Firstly, it is important to understand to what extent they differ from the ‘traditional’ political authorities in more hierarchically societies. There is generally no competition between candidates for succession, most of whom are brothers or other close relatives from the patrilineal lineage of the deceased land chief.”

Source: Chauveau et al., 2004.

Resilience to violent extremism and conflict resolution in north-eastern Mali

“Despite the precarious nature of the security situation, chiefs are still significantly less likely to relocate to more urban centres than other state authorities, making them the sole authority available to raise awareness and monitor potential security threats. Their contribution to community security is fourfold, ranging from the informal gathering of intelligence and liaising with security actors to fundraising for security initiatives and negotiating with armed groups. The main security measures they undertake involve gathering information and intelligence, for example by monitoring foreign elements. Elected officials, such as mayors, therefore depend on traditional leaders not only as intermediaries for the provision of services, but also for gathering information and sharing intelligence with external actors – including state authorities and armed movements. [...] Chiefs support community security mechanisms and measures by providing financial and material support (albeit limited). In Anderamboukane, for example, security measures such as checkpoints and patrols provided by signatory armed movements are funded by municipal taxes collected by village chiefs. [...] In addition to these practical support measures, chiefs can also act as mediators, both with armed movements acting as security actors and in relation to potential threats to the community.”

[Traditional] chiefs are ‘often regarded as the primary agents of justice and the primary mediators between members of the community. In the event of community disputes and conflicts – ranging from family and marital disagreements to disputes over land management, including conflicts between farmers and herders and more serious crimes such as cattle rustling and banditry – traditional and religious leaders are often the first to be consulted by the aggrieved parties. In the Ménaka region, half of those surveyed identified traditional leaders as the community figures to contact for conflict resolution. In Gao, this proportion is even higher, standing at 67%. In some cases, traditional elites are also called upon to reduce tensions and disputes between the various signatory and compliant armed groups.”

Source: Schmauder, 2021

1.3. The complex landscape of local resource governance

Thus, numerous forms of local authorities exist worldwide, whether statutory or not. **This significant diversity makes it difficult to generalise about their types, roles and functioning**, insofar as, depending on the country, local authorities are not the same, do not have the same powers, the same responsibilities, the same resources or the same autonomy (Allex-Billaud, 2014). Nevertheless, they “frequently play a **dual role of governing people and governing resources**” (Chauveau et al., 2004).

The governance of resources, particularly those with shared access (agricultural, agroforestry, fisheries, etc.) within the same territory⁵, **involves local authorities and standards that vary greatly depending on the territory** in question (Rangé et al., 2024) (see Box 3 for an example regarding land tenure). In French-speaking West Africa, for example, decentralisation processes have designated municipalities as the key administrative units for natural resource management, but these often coexist with traditional systems that have long held de facto control (Onibon et al., 1999).

According to Colin et al. (2023), the roles played by authorities in resource governance “can be summarised in a few broad ‘functions’, the political and economic stakes of which vary according to **spatio-temporal contexts**, and which may or may not overlap: defining and controlling access; organising the coexistence of uses, regulating competition and managing conflicts; maintaining or restoring social and environmental balances, which involves, in particular, ensuring the preservation of scarce resources and strategic e , or even promoting their reproduction and/or growth. [...] In practice,

⁵ A territory is understood as a ‘socialised and appropriated space’ (Colin et al., 2023).

resource governance combines different levels of coordination and regulation, with local authorities performing a variety of roles. For example, within the same territory, there may be specific authorities for each resource or group of resources.

The roles, responsibilities and powers of local authorities may evolve over time. For example, in north-eastern Mali, ‘the introduction of elected posts through decentralisation in the 1990s initially challenged the prerogative of traditional authorities at the local level. Since then, traditional elites have succeeded in establishing themselves as intermediaries of power, both within formal governance structures and informally through their role as a link between external actors and rural communities. Even where state actors are present, local governance provided by the public administration relies heavily on the chieftaincy system as a point of contact and link with local communities.’ (Schmauder, 2021).

With regard to rural land, for example, one cannot ‘predict the actual powers of the authorities and the roles defined on the basis of *a priori* characterisations of social organisation and forms of local power. Political and economic changes, and the plurality of norms, produce often complex configurations. [...] In a context of land commodification and competition, traditional authorities sometimes become involved in land speculation, losing all legitimacy in the eyes of the population.’ (Colin et al., 2023).

Box 3. Land regulation in Côte d’Ivoire

“Identifying the authorities involved in land regulation is an empirical question: which types of actors approach which authority or authorities, in response to which type or types of problem? The authorities involved do indeed differ depending on the issues at stake. How do these authorities act when approached? What are their practices?

In Lower Côte d’Ivoire, the sale of a plot of land or the designation of an heir (joint inheritance of the family estate) falls within the remit of the family council, the decision to plant tree crops falls to the heir (who may be absent), whilst the short-term management of available land (direct use or transfer for indirect cultivation) is handled by the manager, the family representative, who is present on site. At the extra-familial level, village authorities may intervene, as well as the court, the gendarmerie, the sub-prefecture, etc. (conflicts arising from transactions, disputes over plot boundaries, inheritance disputes, etc.). In many land disputes in Africa, central government officials invoke their authority to interfere in local affairs, particularly where their own interests are at stake.

The concept of a ‘local land regulation mechanism’, defined as ‘the set of actors, whether public or private, individual or collective, who play an effective role in decisions affecting land (allocation or validation of rights, registration, arbitration, etc.), regardless of their status under the law or local custom, and their relationships of complementarity, competition, rivalry or synergy. [...] The main functions of authoritative mechanisms are to establish the law (to define or redefine norms), that is to say, to allocate or recognise rights to individuals, to make transfers of rights public or official, and to resolve conflicts. These acts may involve *ad hoc* negotiations, but often follow more or less formalised procedures. Local ‘customary’ procedures and state or ‘semi-formal’ procedures may thus complement, merge with or contradict one another, depending on the degree of plurality of norms and the relationships within the local land regulation system.”

Source: Colin et al., 2023

2. The roles and responsibilities of local authorities in crisis management

2.1. Key roles and diverse actions

It is difficult to generalise about the roles, responsibilities and implications for local authorities in a given area in the event of climate-related crises (droughts, floods, etc.) or other crises (conflicts, pandemics, etc.). Indeed, ‘decisions in the face of drought are taken by a variety of actors (individuals, families, institutions), each influenced by their personal characteristics, their institutional position, and the social and normative structures within which they operate. Perceptions of and reactions to drought vary according to experience, responsibilities and available resources. [...] Decision-making falls within a continuum ranging from individual to collective actors, and within a spectrum of influence ranging from strong (autonomous power to act) to weak (institutional constraints). Even without official power, certain actors can influence decisions through their expertise or political pressure. Choices are therefore the result of an interaction between structural constraints (laws, standards, alert thresholds) and individual agency (the capacity to act, circumvent or resist rules). Furthermore, the capacity for action also depends on material and social resources.’ (Cravens et al., 2021).

Their roles and responsibilities also encompass **a wide range of activities aimed at preparing, responding to and recovering the region from a crisis**. Local authorities may play distinct and complementary roles within the same region, but these may also overlap. All operate at the intersection of community needs, resource management and government policies. **The**

interaction between these different authorities can therefore shape the overall effectiveness of drought management (Cravens et al., 2021).

Local public authorities have the power to make and implement decisions (Wilhite and Knutson, 2008). They provide the structural framework, policies, legal authority and resources necessary for the coordinated management of a crisis, from advance planning through to the execution and coordination of responses, as well as ensuring community safety:

- Institutional capacity building: establishing collaborative frameworks or mechanisms at the sub-national level (e.g. drought working groups, risk assessment committees) essential to a proactive, risk-based approach rather than a reactive crisis management approach (Wilhite and Knutson, 2008; Cap-Net et al., 2020). Such mechanisms, typically comprising representatives from government agencies and stakeholder groups, can oversee and guide the development and implementation of drought management plans (Cravens et al., 2021).
- Translating large-scale strategies into local actions by ensuring that responses are tailored to the specific socio-ecological context (Cravens et al., 2021).
- Establishing and utilising early warning and monitoring systems to provide timely information to decision-makers, improve seasonal forecasts and, *ultimately*, guide drought management before it occurs, or as soon as it begins, and trigger (based on threshold values) the measures of a risk management plan designed to reduce its potential impacts (WMO and GWP, 2016).
- Management of a territory's natural resources through multi-stakeholder institutional structures (such as river basin committees that ensure decentralised and participatory water management) which enable the emergence and/or consolidation of collective action and the flow of information between other levels of government (Cravens et al., 2021; Wilhite and Knutson, 2008).
- Supporting community engagement through partnerships with NGOs and community groups to improve resilience, for example (notably by promoting sustainable resource management practices). Effective communication channels between local governments and community associations can be established (King-Okumu et al., 2021).
- In the event of a crisis, they are often responsible for implementing drought response plans tailored to their local area and for managing immediate issues such as water supply. They implement immediate measures to protect communities: declaring drought-related emergencies, establishing and coordinating response mechanisms (emergency aid, veterinary services, safety nets, etc.). They are generally the main links between the government and the public, disseminating vital information in the event of a crisis.
- Etc.

In French-speaking West Africa, for example, municipalities are legally designated as the main local authorities responsible for managing environmental crises, thanks to the powers conferred by decentralisation. They are the first to intervene in the event of a drought, implementing local water management measures, for example, and/or public awareness campaigns (Onibon et al., 1999).

Crisis management may also involve various traditional local authorities, particularly in regions where these hold significant influence and/or where 'conventional' governance may prove absent or ineffective (Pradhan, 2020). Traditional authorities play a crucial role in local governance, leveraging their legitimacy to facilitate an effective response to crises. They often work to resolve conflicts and manage scarce local resources, making them figures of trust and authority within their communities and, to some extent, vis-à-vis national governments in times of crisis (Honig, 2019). Thanks to their local knowledge, they can exert significant influence over the adaptive strategies to be implemented, community organisation and direct action (Cravens et al., 2021). Furthermore, their proximity to local populations enables them to act as intermediaries with the state: facilitating communication, managing and distributing resources and aid in times of crisis (Honig, 2019), etc. These synergies with the state are particularly vital during crises where public governance structures may be limited (Pradhan, 2020). This collaboration may involve integrating customary laws and practices into formal disaster management frameworks, empowering traditional leaders as state agents with a limited mandate to facilitate decentralised disaster mitigation policies, and establishing partnerships for service delivery and resource management.

2.2. Their strengths in anticipating and managing crises

Local authorities are key players in the preparation for and management of drought-type crises for several reasons—practical, strategic and democratic—due to **their proximity, legitimacy and long-standing presence in a given area**. They thus act as the ‘first line’ of response, coordination and communication in the event of an emergency.

They are legitimate, close to the local population and the realities on the ground

These are the authorities closest to the local population, economic stakeholders (farmers, businesses, public services, etc.) and the natural environments concerned. They possess detailed knowledge of regional characteristics, local vulnerabilities and resource use, which is essential for anticipating and tailoring responses to each specific area. Thus, by combining the deeply rooted local knowledge of traditional authorities with the resources and official structure of the state, communities can implement more robust and culturally appropriate resilience strategies (Pradhan, 2020).

Local public authorities are often the only actors in the area to have been ‘(partly or entirely) elected by the inhabitants. They therefore enjoy significant legitimacy among the population that no other actor (associations, foreign organisations) possesses. This legitimacy is based on their mandate to provide and manage public services that serve the general interest of the inhabitants’ They ‘are much closer to citizens than other public institutions and are able to offer significant expertise not only in the provision of services (education, health, water, transport, etc.) and the establishment of democratic institutions and efficient administrations, but also as a driving force for change and for strengthening relationships of trust between the various parties’ (Allex-Billaud, 2014).

Regarding traditional authorities, Schmauder (2021) reports that, for example in north-eastern Mali, their legitimacy (in the absence of effective civil servants and state officials) is linked to their access to and control over the resources needed to meet, at least partially, the community’s expectations. In the absence of state authorities, expectations regarding the provision of basic services have partly shifted towards traditional leaders, who constitute the sole link with the administration.

For example, lessons-learned studies of various projects carried out in West Africa show that when local authorities were involved in the planning and management of natural resources, the results were more sustainable in terms of ecological and social resilience (IUCN, 2010). Their local legitimacy does indeed facilitate community buy-in and improves the effectiveness of the measures implemented.

They have the capacity to act swiftly and in a targeted manner in the event of a crisis

Decentralisation has revolutionised the issue of governance, which is a game-changer in terms of disaster prevention, management and reconstruction. Local authorities are key players in situations of extreme emergency. It falls to mayors and elected representatives, where possible (and where they exist), to deal with the crisis, and they are the first to mobilise given their presence on the ground. Indeed, their proximity to affected populations and the local area enables appropriate and rapid interventions. When they are granted sufficient autonomy and resources, they can provide leadership, coordinate actions, effectively mobilise communities and engage with them. They can implement concrete measures that are closely aligned with local challenges and the needs of the population. Furthermore, “they can mobilise the appropriate actors (civil rescue organisations, police, local NGOs, etc.) for initial emergency response. Local authorities can also assess the consequences of the crisis and identify priority needs. Their proximity is also an asset in reaching vulnerable populations, particularly in remote areas. Local actors often have more information than external responders regarding the location and needs of these populations and can therefore more easily provide them with appropriate assistance. “ [...] This knowledge of the terrain is also an asset for the effective deployment of aid, particularly international aid. [...] Whilst they cannot meet all needs on their own, local authorities can act as focal points in the coordination of emergency aid, and as relevant intermediaries between the various partners” (Allex-Billaud, 2014). Where state governance is limited, traditional authorities can act as first responders, disseminators of information and guardians of local harmony (Honig, 2019; Pradhan, 2020), particularly when they are officially designated as state delegates and agents with a limited mandate to facilitate decentralised disaster risk reduction policies.

They have a long-standing presence in the area

According to Allex-Billaud (2014), local authorities “often constitute an indispensable link in sustainable territorial governance.” If they have the necessary means and resources, “their actions are long-term in nature, unlike those carried

out by NGOs and field operators, for example, which are often planned for a fixed duration determined in advance (usually three years). In the event of a crisis, local governments can thus serve as a stable point of reference when the central government's presence is scattered" (Rangeon, 1996).

Finally, "local governments, by virtue of their deep-rooted presence in the territory, can guide the implementation of short-term projects and ensure successful transitions from emergency response to reconstruction, by involving new actors in longer-term projects. Indeed, local actors can inform development organisations of what has been done, how, and with what vision, and explain the local priorities and strategies to be followed in order to rebuild the region sustainably. They thus facilitate a gradual return to a development process that takes into account the concept of territorial resilience and . The involvement of local authorities also ensures local ownership of projects and their sustainability once international actors withdraw. A presence on the ground must also enable local authorities to play a significant role in the crisis prevention and preparedness phase. Finally, as normality is restored, local authorities have the capacity to provide feedback on the crisis experience and its management, on what worked, what can be improved, and what needs to be done to ensure that the next crisis has less impact. In short, it appears that local actors can become the missing link in the 'prevention-emergency-reconstruction-development' continuum (Allex-Billaud, 2014).

3. Limitations and constraints

The strain on resources during climate-related disasters highlights the limitations of local governance systems, which struggle to respond effectively to complex, multi-sectoral and increasingly recurrent crises such as those linked to droughts. These challenges are exacerbated in remote or marginalised areas where formal governance structures may be weak or absent. Local authorities are thus confronted with various constraints and challenges that affect their ability to govern effectively. These include the growing mismatch between their responsibilities and their resources, issues of legitimacy, and the complexity of managing diverse and sometimes conflicting demands from citizens, other government bodies and private actors (Rangeon, 1996).

Lack of financial, human and technical resources, and of cross-sectoral and inter-institutional coordination

The effectiveness of local authorities may depend on the level of decentralisation (provided that this is accompanied by genuine transfers of powers and resources) as well as on the support they receive from central governments and other stakeholders. Underfunded local authorities are, in fact, too weak and heavily dependent on financial transfers and resources from central government (Boex, 2013; Ribot, 2015). One of the main obstacles lies in the scarcity of resources allocated to local authorities: funding is limited, short-term, and often guided by priorities set at levels other than the local one.

Local authorities also face a shortage of qualified human resources and technical capacity to provide basic services. When a crisis strikes, local public authorities 'tend to lose control of their territory and it becomes difficult to meet residents' needs, to continue the usual delivery of services, and above all to bear the additional human and financial costs associated with the crisis. [...] In vulnerable or fragile countries that were already experiencing difficulties (lack of financial and technical resources) in fulfilling their public duties prior to the crisis, the crisis exposes the fragility of local administration and governance" (Allex Billaud, 2014).

Local authorities, faced with growing social needs that outstrip available resources in times of crisis, lose the support and trust of citizens and may ultimately find themselves stripped of their legitimacy (Rangeon, 1996). These constraints "risk completely undermining the credibility of local leaders in the eyes of the population, who will then seek alternatives to the legitimate local framework (turning to solidarity groups, particularly religious or ethnic ones). Ultimately, this risks exacerbating social fragmentation, undermining cohesion and making it even more difficult for local authorities—having lost the support of their constituents—to manage the transition out of the crisis and the return to normality." (Allex Billaud, 2014).

Local authorities, facing an increasingly complex environment due to the crisis, are all the more helpless because of poor cross-sectoral coordination (water, urban planning, agriculture, e , etc.) (Rey-Valette and Mathé, 2012; Leloup et al., 2005). This lack of cross-sectoral coordination complicates the implementation of cross-cutting strategies, which are nevertheless necessary to respond to crises as systemic as droughts (Karambiri, 2018; Piraux, 2021). Local authorities may also face

institutional compartmentalisation that hinders the development of coordinated responses. Local regulatory frameworks, which are often vague or unsuitable, also limit their room for manoeuvre.

Multiple authorities within a territory: between complementarity and rivalry

The effectiveness of drought preparedness and response depends on the successful interaction and integration of different types of authorities. The integration of formal and informal systems of authority ensures a response to drought crises that is more holistic, resilient and context-appropriate (Cravens et al., 2021; Cap-Net et al., 2020). However, it must be acknowledged that this is often not the case for various reasons.

1. Conflicts over power and resources

“In many [African] countries, formal and traditional local authorities fiercely compete for power and resources. Land allocation and management is perhaps the main point of contention. This situation is often due to the lack of a clear demarcation of responsibilities between the two structures. The absence of cooperation mechanisms between the two structures can be a source of conflict. Sometimes, neither formal local governments nor traditional chiefs are comfortable with the idea of having a ‘competitor’ within their respective jurisdictions. Traditional chiefs also fight amongst themselves to expand their territory and increase their influence” (University of the Western Cape et al., n.d.). This situation is further exacerbated in times of crisis when resources become scarce.

Furthermore, “the issue of resource control can fuel confrontation between local and state norms, driven by the lure of potential rents and demands for the enforcement of state law. [...] The capacity of authorities (both local and state) to control access to and the use of resources, as well as to sanction behaviour that contravenes defined rules, is crucial to ensuring compliance with these rules (*enforcement*) (Fitzpatrick, 2006). This capacity varies greatly. It depends on the degree of legitimacy these authorities enjoy in the eyes of users, as well as on the regulatory and coercive means at their disposal. It is facilitated when the principles governing access to and use of resources – including principles of inequality – are considered socially acceptable by users and are therefore uncontested. Conversely, it is undermined by tensions surrounding the resources and/or territories in question, by the plurality of norms (and in particular the tensions between local and state norms), by competition between authorities, or by the presence of users unfamiliar with local norms and capable of opposing them. Although intended to ensure the ‘rational management’ of the resources in question, public policies (on forestry, pastoralism, fisheries, etc.), based on equal citizen access to the resource and state control of that access, have frequently led to a weakening of local regulations and the creation of situations of de facto free access, sometimes resulting in overexploitation” (Colin et al., 2023).

Catley et al. (2013) highlight another significant risk associated with decentralisation: the ‘capture by elites’ of control over economic and political resources, thereby preventing minorities from defending their interests in the event of a crisis.

2. Multiplicity and fragmentation of powers and functions within the same territory

“The integration of local authorities into broader political spheres gives rise to forms of multi-level governance, coordinated in various ways. In particular, nation-states seek increased control over their societies at the local level (particularly mobile social groups) and over profitable resources (timber, minerals, fishery products, etc.), which has frequently led to the questioning of local authorities’ s and/or the proliferation of authorities within the same territory, notably through the introduction of administrative powers and specialised technical services, thereby increasing the diversity of standards and authorities. Conflicts between these various authorities (for example, between forestry departments, livestock farmers and arable farmers, or between fisheries departments and fishermen, but also between agricultural and forestry departments) are therefore frequent.” (Colin et al., 2023).

3. Marginalisation of local authorities by other actors

Despite their strategic role, local authorities can be relegated [often, according to Allex-Billaud, 2014] to a secondary role in resource management, particularly in times of crisis:

- ‘Even where elected local representatives exist (as in Senegal, Mali, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Uganda), they are rarely chosen or tasked with representing local communities on important issues of natural resource management. Their powers remain severely limited or constrained by central government institutions. Donors and NGOs pursuing decentralisation programmes marginalise elected local authorities. This illustrates a general lack of trust in any form of local government (see Evans 1997 and Tendler 1997; cf. Roméo 1996). In Mali, where new laws grant control over

forest management to local elected representatives, too many projects bypass them in favour of project-established committees or authorities described as 'traditional', with custom often serving as a pretext for perpetuating inequalities linked to caste, ethnicity or gender. Foreigners often prefer to work with customary authorities to demonstrate their sensitivity to 'indigenous' demands. Central government officials also frequently support customary authorities because they can serve as sources of votes in national elections and are easier to integrate into networks of influence than locally elected authorities, who are 'less predictable' (Ribot, 2015).

- In the event of a crisis, local authorities may be ignored by emergency NGOs and international institutions intervening in the countries concerned (Box 5). 'Their authorities are portrayed at best as incompetent, at worst as corrupt, and in all cases as negligible [...] International actors make decisions and implement actions on their territory, most often without their consent, and sometimes even without consulting them. Above all, local authorities, left to their own devices after the departure of international organisations, struggle to regain control over their territory and local reconstruction. [...] This loss of control puts local actors in a precarious position, as they risk losing the trust of their residents and no longer having the legitimacy required to carry out their duties [in particular, to take charge of the reconstruction of their territory after the crisis]' (Allex-Billaud, 2014⁶).

A lack of access to information

The lack of access to accurate climate data at the local level is a major obstacle to anticipating a crisis. Without monitoring, mapping or integrated planning tools, local authorities struggle to identify the specific vulnerabilities of their territory, issue early warnings or plan appropriate responses (Leloup et al., 2005; UNCCD, 2023). This information deficit increases their dependence on external actors and reduces their capacity to act autonomously.

Box 5. Marginalisation of local authorities in international interventions: the example of the post-earthquake crisis in Haiti (2010)

Two paradoxical observations: local authorities, by virtue of their proximity and legitimacy, are on the front line when a crisis erupts in their territory; yet international actors (particularly humanitarian ones), who intervene to support affected areas, may sideline them: "Local authorities, although they require significant support to cope with crises, are marginalised in the crisis management processes implemented by international actors— both in emergency situations and in programmes aimed at reducing the vulnerabilities of fragile states." They may be ignored "out of fear of corruption, and due to a lack of understanding of their role".

⁷The crisis in Haiti following the devastating earthquake in January 2010 is a good example of the marginalisation of local actors in emergency management and the lack of aid coordination, despite the presence of the OCHA cluster system in the country since 2006. Several evaluations – carried out once the crisis had ended – highlighted the lack of involvement of national and local authorities in the crisis management process, and more specifically in OCHA's cluster system, which is nevertheless designed to coordinate stakeholders. National and local authorities were in fact excluded from the coordination mechanisms.

"This had a particularly negative impact on local authorities and communities, as they were unable to take ownership of the tools and mechanisms in place and were therefore unable to strengthen their capacity for crisis management and territorial governance. The loss of control over territorial management by the legitimate authorities, which was supposed to be temporary and short-lived, was therefore not addressed by the international intervention, and local authorities were unable to regain control of sectors essential to the lives of residents (water, health, emergency housing, etc.) and of their territory. This undermined their legitimacy and prevented local authorities from consolidating their institutional capacities. Furthermore, one of the major limitations of the use of clusters in Haiti was the lack of a participatory approach. The population was largely viewed as recipients of emergency aid, rather than as key stakeholders integrated into the process. Once these initial criticisms had been identified, OCHA sought to adapt the cluster system and make it more inclusive for the Haitian authorities. Nevertheless, the exclusion of local authorities from the initial relief phase had a significant negative consequence: local and national authorities, feeling sidelined by the international system, developed a certain resistance to the coordination mechanisms, perceiving them as a threat to their legitimacy and their actions, and took some time to integrate into the cluster system. All this created difficulties for the transition when the emergency organisations and their operations withdrew. It would appear that the cluster mechanism, in Haiti at least,

⁶ See also <https://cites-unies-france.org/Les-autorites-locales-dans-la>

⁷ A humanitarian coordination mechanism used to organise international aid in crisis situations. This system is coordinated by the United Nations, in particular by the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

was fairly successful in coordinating the various international actors but did very little to involve national and local authorities in the process.”

Source: Alex-Billaud, 2014

Bibliography

Alex-Billaud L., 2014. The generalist local approach to the crisis management process. Political Science. dumas-01112765

Baldwin K., 2025. Traditional authorities around the world: toward a better understanding of their de facto power, downward accountability, and state recognition. *Annu. Rev. Political Sci.* 2025. 28: 95–114.

Boex J., 2013. The PEFA framework for measuring performance at sub-national government levels. Definitions and typology. Working paper.

CAP-Net, Global Water Partnership, IDMP, WMO, 2020. Drought risk reduction in integrated water resources management.

Catley A., Lind J., Scoones I. (eds.), 2013. Pastoralism and development in Africa. Dynamic change at the margins.

Chauveau J.-P., Jacob J.-P., Le Meur P.-Y. (eds.), 2004 – Governing people and resources: dynamics of the internal frontier. Special issue of *Autrepart*, 30.

Colin J.-Ph., Lavigne Delville Ph., Léonard É. (eds.), 2023. Rural land tenure in the Global South. Issues and analytical frameworks. Montpellier: IRD Editions.

Cravens A.E., Henderson J., Friedman J., Burkardt N., Cooper A.E., Haigh T., Hayes M., McEvoy J., Paladino S., Wilke A.K., Wilmer H., 2021. A typology of drought decision-making: synthesising across cases to understand drought preparedness and response actions. *Weather and Climate Extremes*, 33: 100362.

Honig L., 2019. Traditional leaders and development in Africa. Draft version of chapter published in *The Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2019).

Karambiri, S. 2018. Territorial governance through local land charters in the Hauts Bassins region / Burkina Faso. PhD thesis in Geography. Univ. Paul Valéry-Montpellier III.

King-Okumu C., Tsegai D., Sanogo D., Kiprop J., Cheboiwo J., Sarr M., Inacio da Cunha M., Salman M., 2021. How can we stop the slow-burning systemic fuse of loss and damage due to land degradation and drought in Africa? *Current Opinion in Environmental Sustainability*. 50: 289–302.

Leloup F., Moyart L., Pecqueur B., 2005. Territorial governance as a new mode of territorial coordination? *Geography, Economy, Society*. 7(4): 321–332.

Olivier de Sardan J.-P., 2004. State, bureaucracy and governance in French-speaking West Africa. An empirical analysis, a historical perspective. *Politique africaine*, 96(4): 141.

WMO, GWP, 2016. Handbook of Drought Indicators and Indices. Integrated Drought Management Programme. Integrated Drought Management Programme Tools and Guidelines Series 2. World Meteorological Organization, Global Water Partnership, Geneva.

Onibon A., Dabiré B., Ferroukhi L., 1999. Local practices and processes of decentralisation and the transfer of natural resource management in French-speaking West African countries. *Unasylva*, 1999(4).

Piroux M., 2021. Evaluating and supporting territorial governance mechanisms: towards collaborative territorial governance. A reflection based on the Brazilian case. Vol. II. Thesis for the qualification to supervise research. URM Tetis.

Pradhan D., 2020. Local customary laws and decentralised community-based disaster mitigation. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research*, 477.

Rangé C., Mansion A., Requier-Desjardins M., Benkahla A., 2024. Neutrality regarding land degradation in the Sahel through the lens of land tenure issues. Critical perspectives on certain approaches and instruments. Synthesis notes, 38. October 2024. CTFD/CSFD/Montpellier Land Tenure Centre.

Rangeon F., 1996. Local government. In Chevallier J. (ed.), *Governability*, PUF.

Rey-Valette H., Mathé S., 2012. The evaluation of territorial governance. Issues and methodological proposals. *Journal of Regional & Urban Economics*. 5: 783–804.

Ribot J.C., 2015. Democratic decentralisation of natural resources: institutional choices and discretionary power transfers in sub-Saharan Africa. *Public Administration and Development*. 23(1).

Schmauder A., 2021. Customary actors in a unique context. The case of north-eastern Mali. *USAID Customary Resilience*, December 2021.

UNCCD, 2023. The contribution of integrated land use planning and integrated landscape management to implementing land degradation neutrality entry points and support tools.

University of the Western Cape et al., n.d. The role of traditional authorities in local governance. Factsheets on decentralisation in Africa No. 9. University of the Western Cape, Dullah Omar Institute, Hanns Seidel Foundation, South African Research Chair in Multilevel Government, Law and Development.

VSF International, 2016. Pastoralism: the backbone of the world's arid zones. Technical summary.

Wilhite D.A., Knutson S.L., 2008. Drought management planning: conditions for success. *Options méditerranéennes*, Series A, 80: 141–148.

Zerbo A., 2008. Employment policies and decentralisation in sub-Saharan Africa. *Voies de l'Afrique*, 01/2008.

Organisé par



Nations Unies
Convention sur la lutte
contre la désertification



Avec l'appui de



Avec le soutien financier de



