

Research themes

Unconventional paradigms in Burkina Faso

The cotton sector in Burkina Faso is considered by many donors a success story despite the fact that the path followed has been far from the usual prescriptions on privatization and liberalization. This may seem ironic. In fact, it is an example of what we call 'unconventional paradigms' of economic reform, where desired results (improvements in the management of the cotton sector parastatal, greater empowerment of farmers' associations and increased sector performance) are attained in unexpected and unconventional ways, which do however fit the existing context.

The 'culture' of cotton in Mali

In most of rural Mali, cotton has been the organizing principle not only for income generation, but also for village development activities, individual prestige and social relationships. Many observers struggle with the persistence of social norms, institutions and beliefs that emerged around the former cotton system, believing them to conflict with current attempts to revamp the sector as profitable business. We find instead evidence that this 'culture' of cotton can be harnessed as a resource for development, when solutions are sought by drawing on these cultural and social elements rather than running against them.

Cotton sector reforms

The role of politics and culture in Francophone West Africa

This research aims to produce a better understanding of how the political, social and cultural context shapes cotton sector reform processes. Its objective is to suggest how agricultural policies might adopt modalities that are more in tune with a country's particular circumstances, and better able to reach desired development outcomes.

As part of national economic restructuring programs negotiated with the World Bank and the IMF, reforms in the cotton sector started first in Eastern and Southern Africa, where cotton was never a key cash crop. These reforms spread more recently to the major producing countries in West and Central Africa. It is here that the debate has been the most heated and intense, and the reforms are taking the longest to be completed.

Some donors and experts have interpreted these hesitations in terms of entrenched opportunistic interests, weak state capacity and constraining rural practices. We believe that the sequence, timing and outcomes of the reforms also reflect the requirement for stakeholders' consensus in forming democracies, modes of social learning, and informal but widespread notions of governance of cotton sectors. Our preliminary research in the region suggests that, far from implying a lack of innovation and modernization, the most promising policy changes are associated with sometimes creative attempts by stakeholders to reconcile divergent paradigms and embed transformation into national and local realities.

Fieldwork has taken place in Burkina Faso, Mali, and Benin (the largest three producers) and is expected to start soon in Côte d'Ivoire. Through this comparative work, we hope to increase policy-makers' understanding of economic reform in a region that is little understood in much of the Anglophone world.

Published by the **Africa Power and Politics Programme**, a five-year research undertaking by a consortium of organisations in France, Ghana, Niger, Uganda, UK and USA.

The APPP is funded by the UK Department for International Development and Irish Aid. For details, see www.institutions-africa.org

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