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Géraldine Chatelard

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Environmental protection, tourism and the new development agenda for the Sahara: the dubious socio-political outcomes of the top-down approach

Dr Geraldine Chatelard, Marie Curie Fellow,
European University Institute, Florence

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Introduction

I would like to discuss critically two recent development plans for the Sahara and their likely problematic outcomes. The first and most ambitious is the UNESCO (2003) pan-Saharan framework plan for tourism development, which provides guidelines for other international and national development agencies that are invited to use them as the basis for their own action plans.¹ The second is one such action plan, designed by the UNDP (United Nations Development Programme),² for the Algerian Great South, Phase II (2004) of which has been elaborated in close coordination with UNESCO.

The philosophy of the development plans

Both plans are based on the philosophy of sustainable development, a concept that gained momentum at the Earth Summit in Rio in 1992, originally in the context of environment conservation. Following Rio, the World Bank set up a special fund, the Global Environmental Fund, to allocate financial assistance to countries that demonstrated their willingness to comply with the new international charter in matters of biodiversity conservation and other aspects of environmental policies. In the decade that followed, most Third World countries created specialised Ministries of Environment and became signatories to related protocols and charters. As a parallel process, the 1990s was the decade during which the World Bank pursued its own socio-economic agenda and put 'poverty alleviation' at the top of its priorities.

Because the various international organisations cooperate in the design and implementation of development projects, their agendas have tended to coincide, resulting in a number of hybrids. Sustainable development, in particular, came to pervade every aspect of the agendas of national and international development agencies in the context of the fight against poverty.

Other international organisations had their own input in their search for activities that were both respectful of the environment and able to generate revenues for impoverished populations: UNESCO introduced the heritage dimension, while the World Tourism Organisation pushed its own agenda, arguing that tourism was the fastest growing industry in the world.

The result is that 'sustainable tourism' – that is, not mass tourism but low-impact forms of tourism like 'cultural tourism' and 'ecotourism' – is now presented as the panacea that will allow for poverty alleviation, while ensuring the preservation of the natural and cultural heritage. It is assumed that properly controlled tourism

development will create jobs, stimulate private sector investment and donor assistance, build local support for environment and heritage conservation and reinforce co-operation between neighbouring countries (tourism is also presented as a 'peace industry').

Since the end on the 1990s, almost every international development organisation has set up either framework programmes or actions plans for the sustainable development of tourism, a move facilitated by the fact that tourism is not a sectoral activity but one that cuts across a large variety of social, economic and cultural domains.

This is the explicit philosophy that underlies the UNESCO and UNDP plans for the Sahara. The specific assumption underlying the UNDP plan is that the biological diversity of the Tassili-n-Ajjer and Ahaggar national parks and the social and economic livelihood of local indigenous communities are under threat from man-related activities: overgrazing, inappropriate agriculture, hunting, pollution, damage to archaeological sites and artefacts, improper development of tourism, inadequate management of the parks, etc.

The specific objectives of the UNDP plan

The aim of the UNDP project is "to protect globally significant biological diversity of the region without impairing traditional community needs and lifestyles". The programmatic part of the UNDP plan contains a biodiversity protection component, and a strong socio-economic component designed to enhance the income of local peoples through activities that can also be sustained outside the context of tourism, such as handicraft workshops for women, cheese making, the transmission and development of musical traditions, etc. Some projects are geared more directly towards training for the tourism market, especially for guides.

Compared to similar such plans devised for other areas of the world in the mid-1990s, the plans for the Sahara have taken account of the pressures that civil-society organisations have exerted on international development agendas. The Saharan plans express concern for the participation of local communities, unlike most previous plans that openly advocated a top-down approach in which decisions at all stages were taken by national bureaucracies and imposed on local communities with minimal, if any, consultation.

More often than not - examples abound in all parts of world - these earlier plans had unexpected outcomes, which resulted not so much from their philosophy but from the way in which they were implemented within national contexts that were characterised by bureaucratic bottlenecks, corruption of the elite, and the manipulation of development plans to serve hidden political agendas.

Such outcomes have been the dispossession of local communities, despoiled of their customary land ownership or resource use, for example by forced displacement, and hence their economic marginalisation and impoverishment. Far from benefiting local populations, the revenues generated through the environment and the cultural heritage in the context of tourism 'development' were tapped directly by outsiders, namely the state and private sector operators.

By contrast, those who designed the two plans for the Sahara stated that they had learnt from these previous mistakes and recognised the necessity of accommodating local, alternative views of development by fostering consultation with local actors at all levels of the design, planning and implementation of the projects. This move should indeed be acknowledged.

Why it is doubtful that these objectives can be met

Unfortunately, local populations in the Sahara, and particularly in Algeria, are unlikely to see these improvements. There are two reasons for this. The first is because the mediation between the international level at which these plans are devised and the local level at which their benefits are aimed is through the national political and bureaucratic culture. This is why one should first ask what the assumptions are upon which government decisions about development in the Sahara are premised. With regard to Algeria, what is the national ideology about development, arid areas, mobile pastoralists, non-Arab populations and specifically the Tuareg, etc.? Is this ideology compatible with that of international development organisations? And if not, are these organisations in a position to ensure that the Algerian officials and bureaucrats who will implement the plans will subscribe to their development aims?

The second reason is because these plans will operate within a state system that is extremely centralised and in which corruption is notoriously endemic. In such a context, what can be expected in regard to the 'participatory approach' that is the central tenet of development for these new international organisations? Moreover, are there any guarantees that the funds allocated by international institutions, in this case the World Bank through its Global Environmental Fund (GEF), will reach the intended beneficiaries?

There are in fact a number of indications that the UNDP plan is likely to be used by the Algerian government as both a channel to secure financial revenues for corrupt public bodies and as a tool in the socio-economic domination of restive local populations. To illustrate my argument, and to contribute to the wider debate, I will raise a number of points and give some concrete examples that are by no means exhaustive but which are linked directly or indirectly to the UNDP plan.

Good governance?

To start with, let's acknowledge that international organisations are well aware of the particulars of the Algerian state system, and of other such systems in a number of Third World Countries. The World Bank has recently produced a document called "Better Governance for Development in the Middle East and North Africa". Based on the realisation that these two regions have a larger 'freedom deficit' than the rest of the world, the World Bank offers a comprehensive programme to enhance both the participation of all sectors of society in the political process as well as the accountability of the decision-makers.

In the development discourse, 'good governance' stands for:

- more transparency in the management of various decision-making institutions;
- greater participation by individual citizens and civil society organisations;
- more equitable rights;

- an independent judiciary, and;
- the greater accountability of elites, in particular by fighting corruption and removing governments from business.

In line with World Bank recommendations, the UNDP plan for the Algerian Great South includes a ‘governance component’ that advocates policy reforms in the context of decentralisation. There are two parts to it: one details mechanisms to ensure participation by civil society organisations; the other is devoted to plans for a comprehensive reorganisation of the management of the two national parks.

There are two problems with this approach to reforms that are imposed from above. One is that those who are the objects of the reforms are also those who should implement them. But, how can it be guaranteed that they will not simply introduce cosmetic changes while preserving most of the functioning of the system? The second is the question of whether the monitoring mechanisms used by international organisations to ensure government compliance with their planned objectives, such as reforms of institutions and the proper spending of allocated funds, will be effective in Algeria’s case?

The UNDP plan is at the intersection of tourism, environment, cultural heritage, social and economic development. It therefore requires policy planning and institutional arrangements that bridge several normally unrelated domains of public policy. It also requires cooperation at three levels: between national administrations, between national and local administrations, and between the public and private sectors. All these levels offer opportunities for bottlenecks, bypassing the requirements of the plans and, most pertinently, embezzlement.

Horizontal relations: What is happening at the ministerial level

The budget of the UNDP Project for its two first phases is over US\$ 22,300,000. There have been estimates that the total cost could run to almost US\$550,000,000 over eight years. The money will go entirely to the Ministry of Culture in Algiers, the implementing partner that will reallocate funds to public, private and civil society organisations in the *wilayat* (administrative regions) of Tamanrasset and Illizi.³

The decision to allocate such a large budget to one ministry has created tensions with other ministries that feel they should also be involved in the plan, particularly the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Environment, both of whom have been struggling to impose their participation. Up to now, the Ministry of Tourism has remained marginalised. But the Minister of Environment has found an effective way of securing his own participation and of capturing part of the allocated funds. The Minister concerned, Cherif Rahmani, has created the *World Deserts Foundation*, with the status of a non-governmental organisation that has imposed itself as a major civil society partner at all levels of consultation and implementation of the UNDP plan. The *Foundation*, for example, was the co-organiser with UNESCO of the international workshop held in Ghardaia in April 2003 on “What sustainable development in the Sahara, with what tourism?”

The presentation brief of the *Foundation* takes up the discourse of sustainable development, making sure that none of the catchphrases is missing. Maybe the most

ironic part of it is the authors stress on “the needs for proximity, delegation and decentralisation in any action taken”, and their statement that their proposed objectives are “to give desert peoples ... the possibility of defending their own interests... with one voice”. The voice of whom?

There are several reasons for believing that the *World Deserts Foundation* is yet another governmental NGOs of the type that has become common in Third World Countries. They generally have the dual purpose of (1) being conduits for the receipt of international funding that are not meant to be received by public institutions and (2) providing a well organised and articulate civil society partner in the implementation phase of development projects, thus saving international organisations the need to look for other such partners. In fact, they are part of the strategy adopted by government elites to block effective civil society participation. In this regard, at least two major civil society corporate actors have not been involved in the consultations over the UNDP project: the so-called district associations (*associations de quartiers*), and the UNATA (*Union Nationale des Associations des Agences de Tourisme Alternatif*), probably because both have been overtly critical of government policies.

Vertical relations

This leads me to look at vertical relations between the government and local partners, particularly the private sector, at the level of the *wilaya*.

The Algerian case is one of centralised regulation. All basic infrastructures for tourism development are constructed and managed by the state. The land and the resources upon it have been nationalised.

There is currently a process of privatisation taking place in the tourism sector, although not of the natural and cultural resources that generate its revenues. However, tourism development requires centralised planning and infrastructure and implies cooperation between the public and private sectors. Yet public-private sector relations are not easy in Algeria. There are several aspects to these relations:

- A certain political and economic culture in the Algerian government, inherited from the FLN (*Front de Libération Nationale*), regards the private sector with suspicion, especially the tourism industry, which largely evades central control and is being accused both of making easy money in foreign currencies and also of contributing to the degradation of the environment and the cultural heritage.
- The inflexibility of the public institutions conflicts with the necessarily flexible needs and arrangements of the tourism industry, which are seasonal, volatile, and for the most part informal. Algeria’s extremely procedural administration requires Travel Agencies (TA) to complete unnecessary, burdensome and often impossible paper-work.⁴
- The state’s bureaucratic procedures are highly dependant on the whims of local government personnel. For example, during the depression of Algeria’s tourism industry (1992-1999), the Tamanrasset *wali* (regional governor) was widely credited for his actions in compensating those living off tourism for their loss of income. He had a camel-racecourse built, introduced an annual subsidy for camel breeding and organised activities for 4WD vehicles, etc. Conversely, his successor was widely criticised for his inappropriate attitude

towards tourism. Initially, he forbade TA from letting tourists sleep ‘under the stars’, insisting that they stay in hotels, and expressing criticism of the hygiene of both handicraft workshops and camels. Local TA understood his attitude to be an expression of his antagonism to and lack of support for tourism development in the South.

In fact, mid-level providers of tourism services (local travel agents) have been asking for more market-driven regulations, whereas the state has been wavering between renewing centralised control or lifting this control and opening the market to private investment. In this tension between centralisation and privatisation, development assistance (UNDP projects) is being used as a tool through which the state can exercise control over the private sector.

There are many documented examples of the fact that when a government in an authoritarian or oligarchic state makes use of such concepts as ‘environment’ and ‘cultural heritage preservation’, it is usually to debar the operations and initiatives of independent local operators, who, to justify the state’s take-over of the sector, are then accused of ethical shortcomings.

The government then reinforces the existing system of control while marginalising all individual and collective actors of civil society that do not acquiesce. It is difficult to oppose such control measures because the government argues that it has international backing and funds to implement them. Opponents of the projects therefore appear as elements that oppose the philosophy of the plans themselves and who care for profit and not the collective good.

The state as a predator

This brings me to the issue of corruption. International organisations cannot ignore that corruption is endemic in Algeria’s government sector. Reports by the reputable and independent organisation, Transparency International, have repeatedly criticised the Algerian state for all kinds of fraud: corruption of high level officials, bribes, various scams, electoral fraud, etc.

The same reports have highlighted the fact that the new development programmes that foster economic liberalisation also create new opportunities for officials to appropriate funds, because they come at a time when institutions have not yet been reformed and are still over-centralised and opaque. The same goes for other types of development plans such as the one for Algeria’s Great South. According to Transparency International, the budgets of the Algerian state are not detailed enough to allow for an in-depth examination of how funds are used. This allows ample space for the embezzlement of a large part of the budget allocated by the UNDP for its Algerian project.

Local people interviewed in the Algerian Great South during fieldwork in December 2003 and January 2004 see the state as a predator, hunting down opportunities to appropriate surpluses from the control of local producers, while at the same time seeking constantly to enlarge its field of operations. Local opinion reckons that production surpluses on a big enough scale to attract the state’s attention are generated from both external inputs and demand. The development of the oil industry

is frequently cited as an obvious example. The difference between the oil/gas sector and tourism is that in this particular case of tourism, the state has found a way of appropriating the revenues, through the embezzlement of international aid, prior to the hypothetical development and growth of the sector.

Conceptualising state-society relations in terms of a cleavage does little to explain the relationship between these two actors in the Algerian context. A more useful concept is that of 'state capture'. This is a phenomenon that results from the seizure of power by a group – often backed by a legitimising constituency - which transforms itself into an oligarchy and the state into a rent-extracting machine.

Tourism development and conservation in the South: A priority for the Algerian government?

Together with commerce, tourism is the driver of the regional economy in the Great South. Saharan tourism is highly dependant on the quality and preservation of the cultural heritage and natural environment. But are tourism development and conservation in the Great South really priorities for the Algerian government?

In fact, several of the officials I interviewed in both Algiers and Tamanrasset doubted whether Algeria has a national policy for either tourism development or conservation. Indeed, it could be argued that the rent derived from oil sales makes diversification unnecessary and even costly. In fact, some believe that tourism actually stands in the way of further gas exploitation in the extreme south.

The agenda of international organisations and aid donors has been pushed on Algeria in the contexts of environment, poverty reduction, sustainable development, and the suchlike, which, in turn, has created the incentive for scattered initiatives and projects that include a tourism component.

But, the reality of the situation is that 'sustainable tourism', 'ecotourism' and 'cultural tourism' have merely become catchphrases used by almost every body, especially governments, to attract foreign aid, investors and customers. Why should it be different with the Algerian government? One difference in Algeria is that while the government wants its cut of foreign aid, its Great South is a strategic area in which the authorities would prefer to keep certain regions closed to civilian activities, whether it be to track down 'trans-Saharan' smugglers or to preserve the area as a haven for armed groups – including its own military.

Can international organisations make a difference?

International organisations are not independent from the states within and between which they function. Development plans are devised at the request of, or with the agreement of, representatives of national governments, and are funded by other governments that exchange aid for other types of support, like votes in the UN Security Council. In the case of the UNDP plan, a request was initiated by the Algerian representative to UNDP to draft a project for conservation and tourism development. At another level, representatives of UNDP in the various countries have a diplomatic status: their official actions and public statements are limited and cannot go against the will of the national government that hosts them.

The UNDP in Algiers is a case in point. At the time of the consultation phase for the conservation project, the UNDP Resident Representative (ResRep) insisted that there should be more civil society participation in the project. However, his insistence was to little avail, being met by strong opposition from the regional administration. Moreover, the ResRep insisted on the computerisation of the Ministry of Justice for greater transparency and to provide the judiciary with more autonomy from the executive. The result of the ResRep efforts was that the Algerian government declared him *persona non grata* and asked Kofi Anan, the UN general secretary, to remove him from his post. The ResRep was accused of exceeding his duties and withdrawn from Algeria. His successor was instructed to remain within the limits of diplomatic protocol, with the result that while the successor might also become well aware of the tricks that the Algerian authorities are playing to hijack the largest part of the Great South development plan, he will not be in a position to interfere.

Yet there is sometimes scope for avoiding the misuse of development funds. In the case of the UNESCO project, coordinators at the headquarters in Paris are well aware of the tactics of the Algerian authorities and of what they refer to as the 'tiresome entryism' of the *World Deserts Foundation*. As a result, the UNESCO has been trying to keep away from Algeria and has been aiming instead at developing small-scale projects (no more than 10.000 US\$) in neighbouring countries such as Niger or Mauritania, where there is scope for direct collaboration with grass-root partners.

Nevertheless, the attitude of the Algerian authorities is detrimental to the introduction of the concept of a participatory approach because they deter those institutional actors that want to enter into a direct partnership with local people.

Conclusion

The rhetoric in Algeria's biodiversity and tourism development plans for its Saharan regions of the Tassili-n-Ajjer and Ahaggar might be new, but there are good reasons to fear that, under the guise of poverty alleviation, ecotourism, and heritage or biodiversity conservation, the central government will in fact disqualify local peoples, and their initiatives, from reasserting their own control over the territory and its resources, and will instead use the funds for objectives that differ markedly from those that were intended.

¹ UNESCO. 2003. *The Sahara of Cultures and People. Towards a Strategy for the Sustainable Development of Tourism in the Sahara, in the Context of Combating Poverty*. Paris. UNESCO.

² GEF-UNDP. 2002. *Algeria: Conservation and Sustainable Use of Globally Significant Biodiversity in the Tassili and Ahaggar National Parks, Phase I*. Project Brief, UNDP PINS n° 970.

³ Both the Tassili and Ahaggar parks fall under the responsibility of the Ministry of Culture, as the south was originally viewed as important because of its archaeological heritage (in particular, rock art). Environmental and human aspects were later integrated into this cultural approach, with involvement of other partners at the local level (tourism, housing, etc.) under the authority of the Ministry of Culture.

⁴ TA, for example, have to submit to the authorities multiple copies of client lists containing biographical details, statistics, route directions and schedules, camping or bivouac locations, staff

personnel details, details of vehicles and camels, as well as written request to the police to purchase petrol, etc.