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## Room for Manoeuvre: Users participation in water resources management in Burkina Faso

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### Abstract

Participation in natural resources management is widely promoted in sub-Saharan Africa and faces mounting critics from social science scholars who rarely engage with it practically. We use the notion of room for manoeuvre to reflect on a multi-level participatory approach designed to support the Burkinabè Integrated Water Resources Management policy and propose ways of engaging constructively with local users and policy makers. Within an 'invited space' of participation, water users' room for manoeuvre was enhanced through the acquisition of new knowledge on the legal IWRM framework. This allowed them to interact with decision makers and to extend their networks. Power imbalances were discussed, but this did not lead to modifying existing power structures that hinge on broader societal dynamics.

**Key words:** Participation, Knowledge, Power, Companion Modeling, Integrated Water Resources Management, West Africa.

### 1. Introduction

Decentralisation of natural resources management has long been on the development agenda in sub-Saharan Africa (e.g. Ribot and Larson, 2005). This is particularly striking in relation to forestry

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(Ribot et al., 2006) as well as land management (Toulmin and Quan, 2000) as illustrated by the large scale programmes of '*gestion/aménagement des terroirs*' initiated in the 1980s after the 1970s droughts that affected the Sahel region of West Africa (Batterbury, 1998). More recently, and of specific interest for this paper, many sub-Saharan African countries, including Burkina Faso, have also engaged in decentralizing water resources management in relation to the hegemonic concept of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) (Julien, 2012).

The dynamics and debates over decentralisation are closely intertwined to those over the policies and practices of participation. Indeed, the role and place of local actors in decision-making over natural resources management has changed over time and largely mimicked broader trends in rural development thinking. Though it is an oversimplification, the 1970s can be seen as the decade of state intervention when top-down or blue-print approaches dominated the sector (Ellis and Biggs, 2001). Such approaches framed local actors as beneficiaries and gave them little opportunity to be involved in decision-making. They faced mounting critique in the late 1970s and early 1980s; the lack of local actors' involvement was seen as a major cause of the difficulties faced by and the limited results of state-led interventions. This led to a paradigm shift towards the promotion of process and participatory approaches in rural development, which dominated the 1990s (Mosse et al., 1998). In turn, participation would come to be seen as a "new tyranny" (Cooke and Kothari, 2001) and would face mounting critique considering that it often failed to fulfil early promises and achieve meaningful social change.

Critiques have notably focused on the difficulties of participatory approaches to address issues of power imbalances (Bodin and Crona, 2008; Cooke and Kothari, 2001); on the risk of reinforcing existing networks (Chambers, 2006) or even on the fact that they may lead to an extension of elite domination and control (Ribot et al., 2006); and, in relation, on their lack of emancipatory capacity (Cornwall and Pratt, 2010; Kothari, 2001). Some scholars further highlighted the challenges that exist to ensure a truly inclusive representation of all actors (Peterson, 2010), of their interests (Larson and Lach, 2008), and of the scales at which they express these (Blomquist and Schlager, 2005; Ferreyra et al., 2008). Others highlight that participatory approaches in the context of development practice run the risk of excluding certain behaviours, values, skills and knowledge (Chambers, 2006; Neef and Neubert, 2010; Crona, 2006). Cornwall (2004) notably stresses that, in the context of development projects, participation is often engineered 'from outside' by development workers, researchers, or policy makers and takes place in 'invited

spaces' where natural resources users and other local stakeholders<sup>3</sup> are "invited" to contribute but within the boundaries set by others. They de facto have little room for manoeuvre to express their concerns given the power imbalances and the lack of flexibility that often characterises these spaces.

This paper contributes to the literature on participation in natural resources management in sub-Saharan Africa. We do so from a specific perspective: that of social science researchers who adopt a critical view towards the notion of participation but are also involved in facilitating participatory approaches that have the explicit objective of enhancing the place of local stakeholders in water management decision making. We think this tension can be constructive and use the notion of 'room for manoeuvre' (Clay and Schaffer, 1984; Safier, 2002) to reflect on our practices. We argue that the notion allows for assessing the place that local stakeholders assume in participatory processes for natural resources management in rural areas in the context of (research for) development projects. We then present the water policy framework of Burkina Faso, one of the first sub-Saharan African countries to have initiated reforms aligned with the internationally promoted policy model of Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM). Follows a description of a multi-level participatory approach, which we facilitated, designed to support the implementation of the Burkinabè water policy. We then analyse the extent to which the approach provided significant room for manoeuvre to water users and whether they exerted this beyond the participatory arena provided by the project. A short conclusion recaps our findings, reflecting on our own positioning and highlighting that enlarging the room for manoeuvre of water users also calls for engaging with decision makers.

## **2. Analyzing Room for Manoeuvre**

Lascoumes and Le Bourhis (1998) highlight the existence of two policy making contexts: the first one is based on procedure, dialogue and polycentricity, whereas the second one is based on normative views and centralisation. In both contexts, there has been an increased incidence of arenas and avenues for local stakeholders to be involved in decision-making, though participation may remain discursive or be actually sought for by policy makers.

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<sup>3</sup> We are aware of the debates that exist around the notion of stakeholder, seen by some as being apolitical. We use the term for the sake of clarity, to refer to organisations or individuals who have a stake in dealing with a specific issue, in a given space and time, and develop intentional strategies to do so. In our case these include: users of natural resources (especially water), traditional authorities, elected representatives, political appointees, civil servants from sectoral ministries and governmental agencies, and NGO staff, all operating at different levels (districts, province, region and country).

In these emerging spaces of participation, 'different kinds of actors have different opportunities for influencing and shaping policy process as they position themselves, and are positioned by others, in the different sites in which policy making takes shape' (Brock et al., 2001:22). Scholars have studied the dynamics and limits of public policy initiatives that aim at creating the conditions for excluded groups to contribute and shape decision-making. They notably show that the dynamics of participation in these (new engineered) spaces are culturally and institutionally embedded and heavily influenced by power relations that express themselves within but also outside these arenas (Cornwall, 2004). However, 'even in spaces framed by formal modes of calculation there is some scope for negotiation, that is, actors carve out for themselves a degree of autonomy from the network prescriptions' (Murdoch, 1998:363). Ambiguity (regarding the roles assumed and attributed to any actor) is central for this to happen (Lascoumes and Le Bourhis, 1998), something that has been highlighted in sectors such as organisational theory (Crozier and Friedberg, 1977), environmental planning (Callon et al., 2001), and public action (Jacquot and Woll, 2008). Ambiguity is closely linked to the notion of "room for manoeuvre", which has received comparatively little attention in the literature. Clay and Schaffer (1984) introduce the notion, without defining it, to describe the processes and the practices of policy planning in the field of agricultural and rural development. The notion is grounded in the recognition that policy making and policy implementation are not linear processes and that policy makers can use multiple strategies to follow alternative and escape routes to mainstream practice. The set of strategies policy makers can use is what constitutes their "room for manoeuvre" (Clay and Schaffer, 1984) or, to borrow an Actor-Network-Theory terminology, their "space of action" (Callon and Latour, 1981; Murdoch, 1998). The notion has also been used by Tait (2002) to analyse central and local government organisations practices in relation to planning and the processes of devising plans. The strategies that urban planning professionals may use to extend their room for manoeuvre to steer progressive interventions has been the topic of specific attention (Safier, 2002). There, the room for manoeuvre is a key component of ever-evolving socio-technical systems but the concept is not formalised further.

We build on these earlier discussions and propose that the notion of room for manoeuvre provides a fruitful heuristic tool. We pose that the room for manoeuvre relates to the degree of autonomy that an actor has to express his/her voice and to influence decision making in any

specific arena or network; or in other words the capacity (s)he has to express agency.<sup>4</sup> Hence, the room for manoeuvre hinges on (1) knowledge that individuals have or acquire and on the basis of which they can change their behaviours; (2) the ability they have to navigate existing networks and use them to pursue their interests; and finally (3) their capacity to redress existing power imbalances to their benefit. In this paper, we look at these three dimensions at two different levels. First, we examine the room for manoeuvre that water users had within a participatory arena provided by a research-for-development project that we coordinated. Second, we analyse whether participation in the project allowed extending the room for manoeuvre of local actors in another space of participation, created under an IWRM policy, the Local Water Committee (CLE).

### **3. Participation in Water Management: A critical review**

#### **3.1. *Integrated Water Resources Management as a disputed model***

Over the last two decades, IWRM has imposed itself as the primary governance framework for water managers worldwide (Conca, 2006). According to its main global advocate, the Global Water Partnership, IWRM rests on four guiding principles: water is a finite and vulnerable resource that is best managed along the hydrological boundaries of river basins; water development and management should be based on participatory approaches involving stakeholders at multiple levels of decision making; women play a central role in the provision, management and safeguarding of water; and water has an economic value and should be managed as an economic good (GWP, 2000). Today, more than two thirds of all countries have embraced these principles via national IWRM plans (UN-Water, 2012).

Despite such prominence, IWRM has faced mounting critique among scholars and practitioners alike who have highlighted the difficulties that exist to implement these principles in practice, especially in developing countries (Butterworth et al., 2010). Some scholars highlight that decentralizing water policy has multiplied organisations with overlapping prerogatives, roles and mandates, making decision over water resources ever more complex (Saravanan et al., 2009). Others highlight that participation in decision-making can lead to increased transaction costs, time and actions frame as negotiation procedures among different types of actors operating in different sectors and at different levels of decision-making are cumbersome (Termeer et al., 2010; Lankford and Hepworth, 2010). Despite such critiques, the validity of participation is rarely

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<sup>4</sup> Framed as such, “room for manoeuvre” is closely linked to another notion, that of “empowerment”, which we prefer not to use as it has been heavily critiqued for becoming a development “buzzword”, stripped of any meaning (Cornwall and Brock, 2005; Calvès, 2009).

questioned but authors highlight that participatory processes implemented as part of IWRM reforms remain engineered from the top by decision makers and that natural resource users remain little involved in their design and implementation (Johnson et al., 2002; Molle, 2008).

### **3.2. Local stakeholders in Integrated Water Resources Management in Burkina Faso**

Burkina Faso is a Sahelian country of West Africa characterised by erratic rainfall and little control over water resources. In the mid 1990s, Burkina Faso was among the first sub-Saharan African countries to embrace the principles of IWRM to guide reforms in its water sector (Cherlet and Venot, 2013). In 1998, the government adopted a “Water Policy and Strategy” document that laid the ground for the water framework law (*Loi d’orientation relative à la gestion de l’eau*) enacted in 2001. In 2003, a national action plan for IWRM (the PAGIRE) was elaborated and provided an overarching planning framework for the water sector with a horizon of 2015. One key element of the PAGIRE was the creation of new water management organisations at national, basin, and local levels: the national water council (*Conseil National de l’Eau*, CNE), the water agencies (*Agences de l’Eau*), and the local water committees (*Comités Locaux de l’Eau*, CLE). By 2014, five water agencies had been created to oversee water management in each of the 5 main river basins of Burkina Faso and about 50 CLE had been created at local level to oversee water management in small watersheds (of about 3,000 km<sup>2</sup>) or around small reservoirs (Venot et al., 2014).

At national level, the national water council has a consultative role regarding water policy and legislation. The water agencies are in charge of planning water resources at basin level. They are made of three bodies: a General Directorate of the Ministry holding the water portfolio, an Administrative Council, and a Basin Committee. The latter is the deliberative body of the water agency and is made of representatives of three stakeholder groups in equal number: the administration (sector ministries and government representatives at regional level), local government (most often at regional level), and users (often in the form of industrial water users, farmers’ organisation, and Non Governmental Organisations). The CLEs are local dialogue arenas made of representatives of the same three stakeholder groups (the exact repartition among the three groups is not set in the law but decided when each CLE is set up by the people contributing to their establishment; Venot et al., 2014).

The water law set up the CLEs as organs of water agencies at local level. The area the CLE are meant to oversee is not defined by their members but by the General Directorate of the water agency, which is also meant to provide financial and technical support. As such, the CLEs are rarely in a position to pilot, hence own water planning activities and, at best, they implement or oversee projects defined by others. Building on studies that pointed out that the approach followed to establish the CLEs did not create the conditions for water users to use these newly

created organisations as spaces for voicing their concerns and actively participate to water decision making (e.g. Venot et al., 2014), the following sections critically analyse a participatory-research-for-development experiment. This experiment was set up with the explicit objective of increasing the room for manoeuvre of water users within one of these CLE in the South West of Burkina Faso.

### **3.3. Principles of the Companion Modelling (ComMod) approach**

The Companion Modelling approach, or ComMod, is one among many methods to “modelling with stakeholders” (Voinov and Bousquet, 2010). It is a participatory modelling approach developed for over a decade by an international and multi-institutional group of researchers adopting a transdisciplinary approach<sup>5</sup> to deal with issues of collective action in natural resources management. ComMod processes have been conducted in diverse contexts such as Europe, Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Asia-pacific region, including in the water management sector (Bousquet et al., 2005; Etienne, 2014). The main principles of the approach are advocated for in a charter (ComMod, 2003). Central to ComMod is the co-construction of intermediary tools (such as agent based models, role playing games, and participatory maps) with a diversity of stakeholders (Becu et al., 2014); these intermediary tools support the building of a shared representation of a given socio-environmental system. More crucial than the tools themselves, are the facilitation processes that are designed and meant to allow for a collective identification and discussion of natural resources management issues (Daré et al., 2014). The approach allows representing and testing alternative management scenarios to an existing situation (Le Page et al., 2014). Over the last few years, and starting from the assumption that natural resources management needed to be tackled in an integrated manner, ComMod proponents have engaged in developing multi-level participatory approaches that are particularly sensitive to power relationships, hence difficult to design and implement (Barnaud et al., 2014; D’Aquino and Bah, 2014). The following section critically analyses one such research-for-development project.

## **4. Implementing a participatory approach for inclusive water resources management**

### **4.1. Implementing ComMod in the “Bougouriba 7” Watershed**

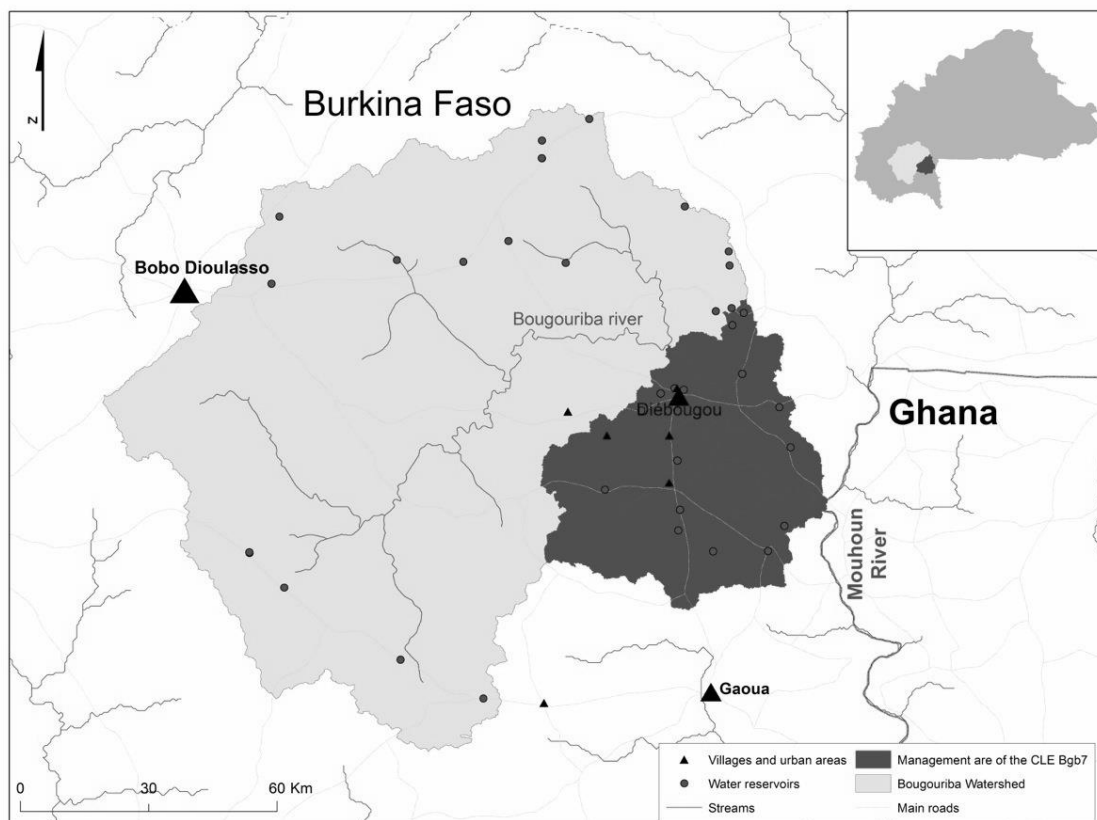
This research was conducted between 2010 and 2013 in partnership with a CLE set up to manage water resources in the Bougouriba 7 watershed, located at the extreme downstream of the

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<sup>5</sup> In a simple definition, transdisciplinary research is interdisciplinary research with stakeholders involved in all phases of the research (for resources on the notions of interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity, see <http://learningforsustainability.net/research/interdisciplinary.php>).

Bougouriba river, an affluent to the Black Volta river (Mouhoun) in the South-West of Burkina Faso (figure 1). The CLE Bougouriba 7 was officially established in January 2010 under the Mouhoun water agency in the aftermath of a large regional project (VREO, 2002-2010) that promoted IWRM principles in the West and South-West of Burkina Faso. It is one of the first CLE to have been set up to oversee water management over a small watershed (rather than over small reservoirs as had been done earlier; Venot et al., 2014).

Figure 1: The Bougouriba 7 watershed in South-West Burkina Faso (Source: The authors)

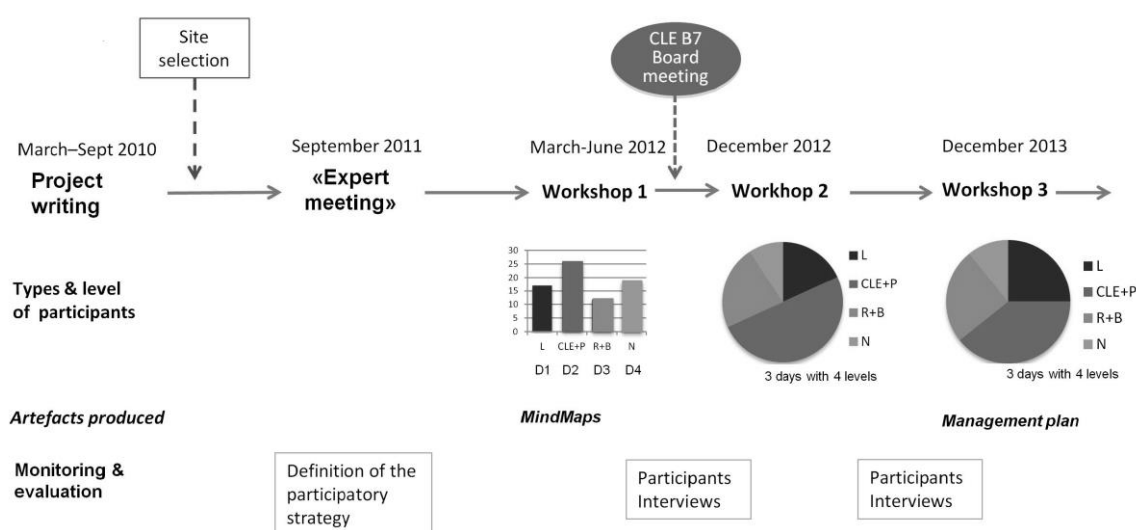


The Bougouriba 7 CLE is meant to oversee a watershed of 2,700 km<sup>2</sup> spanning three provinces (Poni, Bougouriba and Ioba) and 11 communes of the South-West region of Burkina Faso. There are more than 125 villages in this mostly rural watershed and the main population centre is Diébougou, headquarter of the Bougouriba province. Water is mostly used in relation to rural livelihoods (agriculture, livestock rearing, forestry, fishing, and artisanal gold mining). The only industry in the area is a cotton processing plant. Over the last few years, water-related conflicts

have increased due to intensive use of cotton pesticides and use of heavy metals by artisanal gold miners leading to water pollution.

Figure 2 provides a graphical representation of activities held during the project. At the start of the project (September 2011), the Bougouriba 7 CLE was dormant and its members had not met once since its establishment. We first organised a consultation with experts such as national decision makers, academics and development consultants knowledgeable in the field of IWRM. The meeting was held in Ouagadougou, the national capital. This first meeting aimed at identifying the broad lines of the participatory strategy of the research for development project. It was followed by a series of three multi-level workshops organised between April 2012 and December 2013, during which the objectives and terms of engagement of stakeholders with the project were iteratively renegotiated.

Figure 2: The successive stages of the ComMod approach in the Bougouriba 7 watershed (N stands for national, R for regional, B for basin, P for province and L for local levels) (Source: The authors)



The first workshop spanned over 4 days (3 days in Diébougou and one day in Ouagadougou) and aimed at assessing the level of awareness that 72 stakeholders had of the CLE as well as collecting their points of view regarding (1) the roles of such organisation, (2) the mandate it should be given, (3) the land and water management issues it could tackle; and (4) the stakeholders who should be involved in the debates regarding water resources management. To minimise the risks of excluding some points of view (especially those of direct water users), stakeholders of a unique “decision-making level” were invited to participate to a single day of the workshop (see table 1

and figure 2). To facilitate discussions and the expression of multiple points of view, mind-mapping techniques were used. Each day, the questions and the facilitation processes were the same.

Table 1: Timeline and participants to the three workshops (source : The authors).

<b>Workshop 1</b>	<b>72 Participants</b>
Day1- March 5, 2012	Local Water users (labeled L in figure 2)
Day2- March 6, 2012	Statutory members of the <b>CLE</b> and <b>Provincial</b> decision-makers (Labeled CLE+ P in figure 2)
Day3- March 7, 2012	<b>Regional</b> and water ( <b>basin</b> ) agency decision makers (labeled R+B in figure 2)
Day4- March 8, 2012	<b>National</b> decision makers (labeled N in figure 2)
<b>Workshop 2</b>	<b>22 Participants</b>
3 days, December 18-20, 2012	Water users, Statutory members of the CLE, Provincial, Regional and National decision makers, Water Agency representatives
<b>Workshop 3</b>	<b>23 Participants</b>
3 days, December 16-18, 2013	A representative of artisanal gold miners join the 22 participants that had contributed to the second workshop

Following this first workshop, members of the executive board of the CLE met independently from the project and requested the project team to support them in devising the management plan of the CLE (cf. figure 2). Following this request, a three-day workshop was organised in December 2012 with a subset of 22 participants out of the previous 72<sup>6</sup> (see table 1 and figure 2). We presented the results of the first workshop, illustrated how a management plan could be designed through a ‘real world ‘example of another CLE, and provided further information regarding the role and place of the CLE in the Burkinaabè IWRM framework. A “Pyramidal” method for collective prioritisation in successive stages through small group exercises and plenary presentations was used to facilitate the discussions. This led to (1) identifying “making the CLE operational” as the most pressing issue participants wanted to address, and to (2) defining the process participants

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<sup>6</sup> Participants were selected so as to represent a diversity of stakeholders operating at different levels: administration; decentralized government agencies; natural resources users using water resources for multiple purposes (irrigation, livestock watering, fisheries, gold mining, etc.) in different places of the watershed. We also specifically targeted women. Participants were also selected according to their capacity and willingness to interact with others, which we assessed during the first workshop.

wanted to use to elaborate the management plan of the CLE, and collect and account for grievances from stakeholders who did not attend the workshop.

Another three-day workshop was organised in December 2013 with the same 22 individuals and a representative of artisanal gold miners<sup>7</sup> (see table 1 and figure 2). Once again, presentation of the results of the second workshop and mind mapping techniques were used to identify the key components that would form the management plan of the CLE. A first version of the plan was written by 6 individuals (mostly representatives of the administration who were chosen by the participants) and further discussed and adjusted in plenary. A schedule for the writing and official validation of the management plan by the general assembly of the CLE was further elaborated. After the workshop, the writing group finalised the management plan and budgeted the activities without further interactions with the other workshop participants.

To avoid risks of oversight or exclusion of certain points of views, each workshop was followed by interviews. Most of the interviews were conducted with randomly selected water users and their representatives in the CLE (rather than with decision makers, who we assumed could more easily voice their concern during workshops). In total, we conducted 65 interviews. They all focused on (1) assessing the perceptions that participants had of the workshops and their usefulness, (2) the extent to which workshops induced changes in patterns of interactions among stakeholders during and beyond the workshops; and (3) identifying issues and points of views that may not have been voiced during the workshops.

## **5. Discussion: Analyzing and Enhancing Room for Manoeuvre**

In the following, we describe the room for manoeuvre that water users have, have obtained or have been given through their interactions with other stakeholders. We replace our analysis in a temporal perspective by critically assessing how this room for manoeuvre has evolved within the participatory approach time-frame. We structure our analysis along the three dimensions according to which room for manoeuvre can be analysed and enhanced (or restricted) and that we identified earlier in the paper (see theoretical section above). We discuss the room for manoeuvre of water users in regard to the “space of participation” created in the project but also beyond.

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<sup>7</sup> Gold mining emerged as an important issue the CLE should tackle during the second workshop.

### **5.1. Enhancing knowledge, inducing learning, and changing behaviour**

Before the project, local users (in or outside the executive board of the CLE) had little awareness of this organisation. They did not know that the water law allowed for their active involvement and participation in water resources management. The lack of consultation by the regional office of the Ministry of agriculture that oversaw the establishment of the CLE might explain this. During the very short process that led to the establishment of the CLE, little explanation was provided on the role the CLE and its executive members were meant to play. Further, the process of selecting users' representatives to the CLE's executive board was riddled with conflicts (Walaszek, 2012). This initial lack of knowledge regarding the institutional set up of water management in Burkina Faso clearly appeared during the first workshop. First, only 5 persons (1 from the CLE and 4 operating at the national level) out of the 72 participants identified the Water Agency as an important stakeholder in water resources management. Second, all participants to the first day of this workshop (who were all water users) clearly positioned themselves as outsiders to the CLE when, for example, stating that: 'the population has to respect the CLE decisions' or again that the 'CLE should convene and organise meeting with stakeholders' and 'make concrete proposals to stakeholders'. When the project started, water users envisioned having passive relations with rather than playing a pro-active role in the CLE. When interviewed, they declared that the multilevel participatory approach allowed establishing direct interactions between stakeholders who otherwise did not discuss together. It helped water users to better understand the legal framework, and particularly the place and role that the CLE and water users could have in water management. They started envisioning being proactive in the arena provided by the CLE so as to put their priorities on the agenda as expressed by a fisherman interviewed after the second workshop: 'We are working in the water. Maybe others are less interested than us. We have to ask for workshops and seek information about the progress made on the things authorities agreed to do [...] To remind them of what we had done [in these workshops]'.<sup>8</sup>

Based on an enhanced understanding of the IWRM framework partly acquired through the presentations done by the project team and the interactions among different stakeholders that took place during the different workshop, water users started to change their behaviour from a passive to a proactive engagement with the CLE, which they saw as an arena to hold decision makers accountable for what they said, as the above quote illustrates.

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<sup>8</sup> Authors' interview on 21/12/12, Bapla, translated from French by the authors.

Beyond the sphere of the project, however, very little changes on the way people interacted among peers were observed. For instance, during the second workshop, water users stated they would collect grievances from people they were meant to represent in a written format so as to voice them at the following workshop. Only two (out of 9) did meet the people they were meant to represent. The representatives of the fishermen and of the women groups of Diébougou used the opportunity offered by a group meeting (convened for other reasons) to discuss issues related to the CLE, clearly highlighting the fact they started to engage with this arena. Other participants may have informed and consulted the people they represented, but they did not mention it at the start of the third workshop.

### ***5.2. Procedural change and making use of existing networks***

The first procedural change the project induced was clearly highlighted when a water user participating to the workshops stated that ‘what we are doing in this project is something that has never been done since the setting up of the CLE’<sup>9</sup>. Water users, and more generally all participants to the project, highlighted that the participatory approach had led to a significant increase in social interactions among local actors themselves but also between them and stakeholders operating at other decision-making levels.

At the start of the project, water users stressed that they were usually left alone to deal with water related issues and some people gave the example of fishermen unilaterally blocking the river to maintain water availability during the dry season (and also impedes artisanal gold miners digging in the river bed and limit water pollution). The project provided water users an opportunity to ‘reach out’ and extend their network as illustrated by fishermen and livestock farmers asking the project team to invite artisanal gold miners to participate to the 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop to discuss issues related to water.

The second major significant procedural change relates to the direct involvement of water users in strategic planning. Beyond listing their grievances, water users identified the actions that should be included in the management plan of the CLE, assessed their feasibility in terms of human and financial resources, and elaborated a schedule accordingly. This marks a significant change from usual practices in the Burkinabè context whereby the elaboration of strategic plans such as those of CLE is usually entrusted to the administration or external agents (consultants). The choice to collectively develop the management plan of the CLE within the arena provided by the project was partly linked to the recognition of the financial constraints under which the CLE

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<sup>9</sup> Authors’ interview on 17/12/12, Diébougou, translated from French by the authors

operated; it also illustrates the capacity that water users had to manoeuvre the context in which they operated so as to engage in procedures from which they are usually excluded and make use of the tools and reference frames of decision-makers.

Though it is difficult to attribute an outcome to any specific activity, the participatory approach implemented might have yielded procedural changes beyond the arena provided by the project. Two events are particularly worth mentioning as they reflect changes in IWRM policy processes in the Mouhoun river basin. First, in March 2015, the water agency invited the president and the secretary of the CLE (respectively the head of the Bougouriba province and the director of the provincial office of the ministry of agriculture) to present the activities of the CLE at their Basin Committee. Second, in May 2015, the Mouhoun water agency, whose staff had participated to the three workshops organised in the project, funded a meeting of the CLE General Assembly to validate the management plan that had been devised and renew its executive board. Beyond the anecdotes, these events may mark a behavioural change on the part of decision-makers with the CLE acquiring a certain institutional legitimacy they are struggling to acquire as shown by several studies on IWRM policies and practices in Burkina Faso (see for instance: Petit and Baron, 2009; Roncoli et al., 2016; Venot et al., 2014).

### ***5.3. Strategic choices and redressing power imbalances***

The process followed to establish local water committees in Burkina Faso, that is, a rapid consultation on the basis of long written documents prepared by outsiders to the area concerned, clearly reflects that the water administration and other authoritative bodies keep the upper hand –leading to a near exclusion of local water users (Venot et al., 2014).

As far as the project is concerned, the dominant position of the administration clearly expressed itself when selecting the most important issue that needed to be tackled as part of the project during the second workshop. Though the pyramidal facilitation process was meant to diffuse power imbalances through an iterative prioritisation process, it is noteworthy that the issue participants would finally settle on (“making the CLE operational”) was initially put forth by the group made of representatives of the water administration. This is all the more significant that the 5 other groups had considered that “protecting water resources from pollution and siltation” was the key issue that needed to be addressed. On one hand, this selection can be seen as a failure of the participatory process to address power imbalances (or even as their reinforcement), but on the other hand, it may also reflect a strategic choice on the part of (at least some) water users. Indeed, in an interview conducted after the workshop, the person ‘speaking’ for the groups that had put forth the preservation of water resources as their most important concern clearly

stated that she settled for the other objective ('making the CLE operational') as she saw it as a conduit to achieve her own goal.

Another example about the way the participatory approach allowed tackling power imbalances relates to the structure of the executive body of the CLE. The presentation of experiences from other CLE during the second workshop made water users and other local stakeholders realise that the presidency and the secretariat of the CLE need not to be held by the administration but could be entrusted onto others. This led them to express the opinion that the president and secretary of the CLE might not have enough incentives to make the latter work because they were not directly impacted by water management practices and also because this would not be recognised by their hierarchy. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> workshop, many participants –among which water users and local elected representatives - publicly expressed the fact that there might be a need to re-assess the composition of the executive body of the CLE. This type of comment was rarely voiced in a public arena such as the CLE, in a country where the administration was rarely challenged until very recently and the popular insurrection against the previous president Blaise Compaoré in October 2014 (See Jacob, 2006; Hochet et al., 2011 and Lavigne Delville and Thieba, 2015 for further analysis on the importance of the administration in shaping public action in Burkina Faso, and on the relations it nurtures with 'civil society'). These concerns did not, however, lead to any practical actions. In May 2015, the Mouhoun water agency supported a meeting of the general assembly of the CLE (see above) during which the executive body of the CLE was renewed (the former president and secretary had been transferred out of the area). The structure of the executive body remained unchanged: the presidency was entrusted to the head of the province and the secretariat to the director of the provincial office of the ministry of Agriculture.

## **6. Conclusion**

This paper contributes to the literature on participation in water resources management, a priority of development aid agencies and national governments alike in most of sub-Saharan Africa. More specifically, it analyses the room for manoeuvre that local water users had within the framework of a multi-level participatory approach implemented as part of a research-for-development project. A second objective of this paper was to assess whether this led these same actors to re-negotiate their position vis-à-vis other stakeholders, notably in the context of a newly created Local Water Committee meant to constitute a multi-stakeholder consultation arena under the Burkinabè IWRM policy.

The participatory approach clearly induced an increased awareness of the Burkinabè water resources management framework among water users. This led to behavioural changes as the latter started envisioning to pro-actively engage with the CLE while they earlier positioned themselves as 'outside' this organisation. As such, the project initiated a process of appropriation of a space of participation (the CLE) that had been engineered from outside (i.e. from national decision makers). Importantly, the objective of the participatory approach was set by the executive board of the CLE, in consultation with decision makers, and allowed water users to contribute to strategic planning, an exercise they are usually excluded from. The form that was chosen to report on such exchanges (a written document), though, marks a clear limit to their meaningful involvement. In supporting social interactions across levels, the project also enhanced the capacity of local water users to navigate existing networks and make them productive for them. Finally, within the project sphere, local water users had enough room for manoeuvre to question power imbalances but it was not enough for them to redress these imbalances to their benefit "in the real world". The structure of the executive body of the CLE remained unchanged despite elections; the management plan, though based on the inputs of local actors, was largely written by members of the administration.

In the context in which we operated, strong power imbalances (and notably the dominant position and paternalistic attitude of the water administration) meant that extending the room for manoeuvre of local stakeholders, and water users especially, required a dual approach. On one hand, there was a need to improve the listening skills and accountability of decision makers and, and on the other, to strengthen strategic analysis of, and advocacy by, local water users. This can only be achieved through an in-depth understanding of the operating context and social dynamics in which participatory approaches are implemented.

Arguably, the multi-level participatory approach we facilitated is characterised by some of the well known (and likely unavoidable) shortcomings of any "invited space of participation". Using the concept of room for manoeuvre to analyse such spaces and processes is, however, useful to identify arenas for further action that would contribute to progressive social change. Notably, and in the context of research for development interventions, which continue to be widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, it is important to remember that any individual's room for manoeuvre (including the most marginalised) hinges on both the commitment of 'outsiders' (those who 'invite the participation') but also on broader societal shifts. The recent political events of Burkina Faso for instance illustrate how citizens are stretching the room for manoeuvre they had until now (see, for instance, Chouli, 2015), which might have far reaching consequences on the place

and role of local users in water resources management and on dynamics of participation and emancipation within development projects arenas.

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