

## Community Participation in Decentralized Management of Natural Resources in the Sudano-Sahelian Zone of West Africa

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**Abstract :** Decentralized governance of natural resources is considered one of the key strategies for promoting sustainable management of natural resources at local level. The rationale behind decentralization of natural resources is that local populations are both better situated and more highly motivated than outside agencies to manage the resources in an ecologically and economically sustainable manner. Effective decentralized natural resource management requires strong local natural resource institutions. Therefore, strengthening local institutions governing natural resource management is essential to promoting strong participation of local communities in managing their resources. This paper investigated the existing local institutions (rules, norms and or local conventions) governing the management of natural resources and forms of community participation in the development of these natural resource institutions. Group discussions and individual interviews were conducted to collect data. Our findings showed significant variation within the study sites regarding the level of knowledge of existing local rules and norms governing the management of natural resources by the respondents. The results also show that participation was dominated by a small group of individuals, often community leaders and elites. The results suggest that women are marginalized. In general, factors which influence the level of participation include; age, year of residence in the community, gender and education level. This study also highlights the strengths of local natural resource institutions especially if enforced. Presently, the big challenge that faces the institutions governing natural resource use in the study area is the system of representativeness in the community in the development of local rules and norms as community leaders and household heads often dominate, which does not encourage active participation of community members. Therefore, for effective implementation of local natural resource institutions, the interest of key natural resource users should be taken into account. It is also important to promote rules and norms that attempt to protect or strengthen women's access to natural resources in the community.

**Keywords :** decentralization, land use plan, local institutions, Mali

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