

# COMMONS FORUM *RESPONSE*

Response to: Institutions for the Management of Common Pool Resources in African Floodplains: The AFWeP Research Project, by Tobias Haller

## **“We Have Democracy Now”: The Impact of Institutional Change on the Logone Floodplain, Cameroon**

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This paper illustrates how local institutions for managing the fisheries and the pastures of the indigenous Kotoko have been eroded through political change, with more power going to seasonally immigrating nomadic and permanently immigrating ethnic groups such as Arab Choa and Musgum. The Arab Choa and Musgum now claim rights to resources on the basis of democracy, enabling them, as well as the administration, to undermine the power of local stakeholders, a minority unable to control the Common Pool Resources (CPRs). Former, traditional arrangements for sharing pasture between pastoralists and fishermen, as well as the primacy of the Kotoko over fishing activity, have become ineffective.

With 11 000 km<sup>2</sup>, the Logone floodplain is the second most important inland wetland of the whole African Sahel after the Niger Inner Delta. It is situated in the Lake Chad Basin and covers large territories in North Cameroon and Chad. The Cameroonian part of the floodplain is constituted of 6000 km<sup>2</sup>. It is a large inundated area included between the Logone River in the East and the Waza National Park in the West. The flooding process is determined by the Logone and Chari, which constitute the two main rivers of the Lake Chad basin. Together, they represent approximately 95 per cent of the inflow to the lake. The floodplain constitutes a crossroad of many ethnic groups from diverse origins. The most important are the Kotoko specialised on fisheries considered as the owners of lands, and also nomadic pastoralists like the Choa Arabs and Musgum who use the resources (fish, pastures, lands) for their livelihood. This paper presents information from research on institutional change in two villages in the Logone floodplain (Kalkoussam and Lahai) mainly inhabited by Kotoko. The CPRs in their area are used by all ethnic groups, however.

The Kotoko developed their natural resource management system over centuries and left their footprint in all the villages of the Waza-Logone floodplain. The original system was based on ethnic and technical restrictions to the water resources. Local authorities regulated access to fisheries according to seasons. The management of dry season reserves and digging of canals were under the responsibility of a Master of the Land whose authority was reinforced by beliefs that the resources of the floodplain belong to the *mhalaham* (Chiefs of the Water), spiritual beings capable of providing resources and punishing wrongdoers. Nomadic pastoralists had to make arrangements with the Kotoko sultan of Logone Birni for their access to the grazing reserves of the floodplain in order to not interfere with fishing activities. Through a nomadic contract, they paid a tax in kind (*djangal*) to local authorities who then guaranteed their personal safety and access to resources.

This activity was under the responsibility of the *ngalway*, a notable of the sultan in charge of pastoral affairs. Pastoralists looked after cattle of sedentary population, who relied mostly on fishing. These institutions played a key role because they limited access to resources, imposed and controlled access rules, and sanctioned abuses. However, these institutions have been gradually eroded, transformed or are

in a vague form of legal pluralism and we argue that the current resource crisis in the area can partly be explained by this change. In the Cameroonian case, there are many external factors influencing this change such as climatic change and less flooding due to the Maga Dam constructed for rice irrigation, demographic pressure due to immigration, economic crisis and new political organisation (structure of the area into *departments, districts and communes*), modern infrastructures (roads) and techniques (irrigation schemes, new fishing techniques) and conservation (Waza National Park). These factors influence the availability of fish and pasture. On one side, there is decrease of resources due both to less favourable natural and manmade conditions (too little water especially because of the Maga Dam, less land due to the Waza Park). On the other hand, new political structure, infrastructure and techniques have lowered access costs for external users who, due to the economic crisis, see fish and cattle as valuable sources as do locals.

But while local rules have been dismantled, bureaucratic institutions imposed by the State failed to put in place mechanisms of management, monitoring and sanctioning. Therefore, a clear authority is lacking. Most of the resources are increasingly under open access or privatisation. Newcomers such as Musgum and Choa Arabs have gained more bargaining power and impose new regulations. They use the argument that with democracy, the majority (now mostly Musgum) determines how fish and other resources are used. Moreover, state officials are trying to generate profit for themselves and help powerful resource users have open access to CPRs. The pressure on resources of the floodplain have been increasing and can be illustrated by the escalation of conflicts over natural resources, which have taken an ethnic shape; for example, the Musgum no longer wait to fish areas controlled by the Kotoko. Another feature is the increase of profitable traditional fishing techniques such as the canals, which can be made now without problems and indicate the collapse of traditional management regimes. Pressure is rising in some groups with open access; in others, groups with high bargaining power claim exclusive rights. Both situations lead to more conflicts in the Logone floodplain. Often, these conflicts are not challenged by the authorities and some are even provoked intentionally by farmers, fishermen and by local administrators with personal profit in mind; a destroyed channel, a field or local infrastructure by nomads leads to compensation claims by Musgum or Kotoko. From such claims local administrators also profit as adjudicator. One important aspect is that the democratisation and decentralisation of the administration radically changed the traditional hierarchies within the Kotoko society and between the Kotoko as traditional leaders, nomadic pastoralists such as Arab Choa and the immigrants like the Musgum. In their own view, Kotoko rules are only valid for Kotoko. This new perception was based on the notion of democracy” which means for them the freedom to feel at home wherever they are and also the opportunity to use the resources as they please. In the same way, nomadic pastoralists paying taxes to the state do not see why they shall be put under local rules since they consider “they have bought the floodplain” and in their eyes, they can use pastures for free access.

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