

A Negotiated Leadership: The Case of Water Sector Reform in Niger

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This paper deals with water sector reform in Niger and how state agents reason and respond to the process of achieving country ownership through the shift from projects to programmes as the main principle for organizing aid. For over 40 years the water sector in Niger has been subject to constant reforms reflecting and accompanying overall changes in the construction of the role of the state in provision of public services, a process that has closely followed different movements in what can be called a global development discourse. Due to the heavy dependence on external funds present reforms continue to be shaped by development cooperation, to a large extent dominated by the Millennium Development Goals, the Poverty Reduction Strategy, and the Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness.

In order to achieve sustainable reform it is considered necessary for recipient states to assume leadership over its own policies and strategies. This shift has been criticized for being merely cosmetic and for being conditionality in disguise. Yet, if we look at the logic behind this shift there is an important difference. Rather than exercising power through conditionality donors operate through a promise of inclusion and expansion of freedom whereby the recipient country is enticed to engage in its own reform. Based on empirical material in the form of civil servant narratives and participation in ministry-donor negotiation meetings and workshops this paper will discuss the process of achieving Nigerien leadership in the water sector. Particular attention will be paid to how state agents in the sector conceive of the donor-state relationship, individually and collectively. How they draw lines of distinction between outside and inside and work on themselves in order to be included into the activity of government as opposed to the exclusionary practices of the project approach. Against the backdrop of new mechanisms of aid and promises for the future; what are the conditions of possibility for Nigerien state leadership and accountability? How is stateness and sovereignty understood and performed? The purpose is not only to see how they adhere to modes of government practiced by donors but to understand how they negotiate the meaning of 'ownership' and thereby shape the room for manoeuvre in which they can act 'otherwise'. Interviews and participation have been conducted between 2007 and 2010.