

GUINEA-BISSAU: The Role of Local and International NGOs in Environmental Preservation and Sustainability of the Bijagos Archipelago

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ABSTRACT

Bijagos Archipelago in Guinea-Bissau is at present subject to numerous external impacts that affect its centuries old balance. Since 1975 Guinean society has been using its natural resources in an uncontrolled way over the territory and especially in the coastal area. The archipelago has been increasingly raising interest, most of which is incompatible with the guarantee for a long-term sustainable development. It has also displayed a general impoverishment as far as resource preservation is concerned, due to internal demographic pressure of a population that has doubled since 1981 and to external pressure related to neighboring migrations and consequent depletion of non-renewable resources. This article aims to analyze the actions of local and international NGOs in the preservation and sustainability of the Bijagos Archipelago. We seek through an interdisciplinary approach to analyze the phenomena that are configured within the strategies of NGOs, on the assumption that these issues are articulated in the field of geography and sociology, as well as in politics and international cooperation. It is proposed new challenges to environmental issues, especially in a current situation shaken by constant instability internal and external policies.

Keywords: Natural Resources; Sustainability; Potentials; Vulnerabilities.

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RESUMO

O Arquipélago dos Bijagós na Guiné-Bissau é actualmente objecto de numerosos impactos externos que afetam o seu equilíbrio secular. Desde 1975, a sociedade guineense tem vindo a utilizar os seus recursos naturais de forma descontrolada sobre o território, especialmente na área costeira. O arquipélago tem suscitado, cada vez, mais interesse, na maioria dos quais incompatíveis com a garantia de um desenvolvimento sustentável a longo prazo. Tem-se assistido a um empobrecimento geral que põe em causa a preservação dos recursos, devido à pressão demográfica interna de uma população que duplicou desde 1981 e das pressões externas relacionadas com as migrações vizinhas e consequente esgotamento dos recursos não-renováveis. Este artigo pretende analisar as ações das ONGs locais e internacionais na preservação e sustentabilidade do Arquipélago dos Bijagós. Procuramos através de uma abordagem interdisciplinar analisar os fenómenos que se configuram no âmbito das estratégias das ONGs, partindo do pressuposto de que estes assuntos se articulam no campo da geografia e da sociologia, assim como no campo da política e da cooperação internacional. Propõe-se novos desafios para as questões ambientais,

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sobretudo numa atual conjuntura abalada pelas constantes instabilidades políticas internas como externas.

Palavras-chave: Recursos Naturais; Sustentabilidade; Potencialidades; Vulnerabilidades.

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RESUME

L'Archipel des Bijagos en Guinée-Bissau fait actuellement l'objet de nombreux impacts externes qui affectent l'équilibre séculaire. Depuis 1975, la société guinéenne utilise ses ressources naturelles hors de contrôle du territoire, en particulier dans la zone côtière. L'archipel suscite de plus en plus un intérêt dont la plupart sont incompatibles avec la garantie d'un développement durable à long terme. Il y a eu un appauvrissement général qui pose une menace pour la conservation des ressources, en raison de la pression démographique d'une population qui a doublé depuis 1981 et les pressions externes liées à la migration et qui en découle l'appauvrissement des ressources non renouvelables. Cet article se propose d'analyser l'action des ONG locales et internationales dans la préservation et la durabilité de l'archipel des Bijagos. À cette fin, nous cherchons à travers une approche interdisciplinaire pour analyser les phénomènes qui sont configurés dans les stratégies des ONG, sur l'hypothèse que ces questions sont articulées dans le domaine de la géographie et de la sociologie, ainsi que dans la politique et la coopération internationale. Il est proposé de nouveaux défis pour les questions environnementales, en particulier dans une situation actuelle secouée par les politiques internes et externes instabilité constante.

Mots clés: Ressources Naturelles; Développement Durable; Potentiel; Vulnérabilités.

INTRODUCTION

A conservation and development project is based on a variety of knowledge from different branches of natural sciences. In the case of the Bijagos, the importance of knowledge is amplified by ecological fragility and local particularities. UNESCO currently ponders classifying the archipelago as World Heritage. One of the reasons why the islands were kept so preserved is the animist faith of its inhabitants that forbids economical and subsistence activities in many of the areas regarded as sacred. Local populations have a complex natural resource management system which can turn out to be a capital gain in the development of the Biosphere Reserve. However, communication between the traditional chiefs local councils and the rest of society - the State and economic agents, is still limited because of cultural and linguistic reasons. The goal of this article is to reinforce the collaborative management process in regard to natural resources and biological diversity in the coastal zone of the Bijagos islands, for the benefit of the local populations and the country.

ORGANISATION AND FUNCTIONING OF PROTECTED AREAS

For the protected areas to be organized one must define what they consist of. The IUCN's categorization management system for protected areas is based on the following definition, agreed on in the Fourth World Congress for National Parks and Protected Areas. A protected area is a land or sea strip specially reserved for protecting and sustenance of biological diversity and natural and cultural resources associated, being managed through legal means or other effective (KELLEHER, 1994, p.24). This definition encompasses the whole universe of protected areas. In practice, however, the precise purposes by which such areas are managed diverse largely. Those purposes are scientific research; safeguard from uncontrolled use; preservation of species and genetic diversity; maintenance of environmental services; protection of specific natural and cultural characteristics; tourism and recreation; education; sustainable use of resources in natural ecosystems; sustenance of cultural and traditional attributes (IUCN, 1994; 2013).

Guinea-Bissau is divided into eight administrative regions and one independent sector, namely the regions of Bafatá, Bolama-Bijagos Cacheu, Gabu, Oio, Quinara, Tombali, and the autonomous sector of Bissau. The thirty-six regions in total are divided into sectors (Republic of Guinea Bissau National Statistics Office, 2014).



Figure 1 – Political Map of Guinea-Bissau.

Source: <http://www.ezilon.com/maps/africa/guinea-bissau-maps.html>

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The Bijagos Archipelago has great productivity, which can be firstly explained by its localization at a confluence point between two main coastal streams and the estuaries of the Great Buba River. It is also a migration destination for birds and its biological diversity, besides being scientifically relevant, it also plays a considerably important economic role, which, if well managed, can become a guarantee for sustainable development. These and other reasons formed the basis for UNESCO's classification of the islands as "Biosphere Reserves" in 1996, granting some attention to decisions over the territory, especially its development and conservation, as well as the appreciation of traditional and scientific knowledge. The principles devised by UNESCO are compatible with the expectation of a development that fits the region. A biosphere reserve may function as a long-term enforcement tool and make it an example of a new development model. The Archipelago is one of the main spots in the country for the renewal of fishery resources, being fishing a pillar of the country's economy.

Guinea-Bissau's authorities are keen on preserving natural resources. Several efforts have been made so as to promote a national environmental conservation and preservation strategy. The Government, through the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (MARD), the State Secretariat for Environment and Tourism, the Coastal Planning Office (GPC), the Institute for Biodiversity and Protected Areas (IBAP) and the Centre for Applied Fisheries Research (CIPA) and the Commission on Fisheries Surveillance (FISCAP) have been supervising the effective application of different environment protection and management actions and development projects. The IBAP coordinates the João Vieira Poilão National Park (PNMJVP) and Orango National Park (PNO). The first park was created in August 2000 under N° 6-A/2000 law-decree. The four islands that compose the PNMJVP are not permanently inhabited. It is traditional property of four *tabancas*, also designated locality or African village, from the south of the Canhabaque Island that use it periodically for agricultural and ceremonial purposes.

PNO was created in December under N° 11/2000 law-decree. It was created to protect and value the ecosystems, assure the conservation of biological diversity and the rational use of natural resources that may promote social and economic development of its populations. IBAP has a chair in the park's Executive Board. Each board has its own annual operational programme, which is ordinarily validated by the Parks Management Council. This Council is composed by twenty six members, of which thirteen are from local communities and the rest from the State and other NGOs. The election of the members of the management council is the responsibility of the corresponding local

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communities, for those will be their speakers and those who represent the park's management. Boards meet every semester, usually at the beginning and the end of the year and the IBAP supervise its coherence.

The Communitarian Protected Marine Area (AMP) for the islands of Formosa, Nago and Tchediã (Urok) takes a different structure when compared to the above mentioned parks. Created in 2005 by the N° 8/2005 law-decree, it is the Guinean NGO Tiniguena that deals with all the structure, from creation to the very management of the park. The Island's Assembly, the Tabanca's Assembly and Urok's Assembly are present in this structure. IBAP, RBABB, GPC, CIPA and the Harbormaster are part of the latter. Simultaneously there are collaborators that contribute voluntarily or only when requested. The coordination of efforts by institutions and individuals for the conservation of the coastline in coastal countries at the sub-regions (Mauritania, Senegal, Gambia, Guinea-Bissau, Guinea, Cape Verde and Sierra Leone) is done by the Western Africa Regional Programme for the Conservation of the Coastal and Marine Zone (PRCM). The PRCM was created by the IUCN, the FIBA, the WWF and Wetlands International, in a partnership with the sub-regional fishing committee (CSRP). As far as RBABB is concerned, the powers that regulate the access to lands are exerted by traditional authorities, through a decision process (Council of the Elder – traditional ceremonies and age grades) which is characterized by a transference of access rights and a regulation towards the village authorities by the State and national NGOs.

The term collaborative management or co-management, joint or mixed management, multi-shared management or yet joint management agreement, illustrates a situation where all interested parts are associated in a high degree of management activities (BORRINI-FAYERABEND, 1997, p.14). In a process of collaborative management the organization responsible for the protected area – generally a state institution – establishes a partnership with the other parcels, including inhabitants in the area and users of resources. This partnership stipulates and assures the functions, responsibilities and respective rights towards the area. This is what empowerment means. Pluralism and power pose rigid conditions in any representative system. Regarding empowerment, O'Riordan and Stoll-Kleemann (2000, p.91-92) consider that the following conditions should apply: [1] Through a socioeconomic power, communities can create a collective responsibility for their own future and become authors of their own development; [2] Through political and education empowerment, individuals should acquire the capacity to understand democracy and justice in what concerns the fulfilment of their ideas and goals, and feel that they are able to reach

the desired level of well-being; [3] Through technological empowerment, a combination of knowledge of nature and indigenous abilities with organizational technologies will create an innovative mix of resource use styles, which will increase human well-being and minimize pressures over the environment; [4] Through cultural and spiritual empowerment the perception of finalities in human existence and union and trust among communities will result in a increase in meaningfulness in such lives.

In a joint management, local and relevant investor's representatives are present. International experts from different areas of basic natural resources, especially biological and ecological, can be seen as allies. If the population feels confident, long-term coalitions and the developing of a more effective joint management may arise. Authorities in protected areas play a crucial role in the dialogue with local communities, having the duty to use a language that these can understand and to promote technical counselling and encouragement, as well as to supply financial support to help communities organize themselves (NORSE, 1993, p.170). Assistance to these communities goes from discussing solutions, deciding on priorities and strategies to be followed, identifying its representatives, furthering information on the community's members and, if possible, granting a legal statute as local association.

THE ROLE OF LOCAL AND INTERNATIONAL NGOs IN MONITORING NATURAL RESOURCES

NGOs are currently developing sustainable resource management programmes and restoring degraded ecosystems. Resident fishers must be given the guarantee of special access rights. A close cooperation with the administration and cooperation agencies is required for development, if resource use is to be optimized. One can highlight the activity from local NGOs such as Tiniguena, Action for Development (AD), Ton'joron, Nantinyan, ADIM, Tantakan, ADEMA, Biligert, Fashpebi, Totokan and Tepenny, as well as from international NGOs such as IUCN, FIBA, NOE Conservation, Mava, CBD Habitat, Swissaid and Îles de Paix, which, is a partnership with government entities, such as the National Institute of Research and Studies of Guinea-Bissau (INEP), the Coastal Planning Office among others, have tried to implement communitarian development projects, focusing on habitat conservation, but also valorizing scientific research and education. Actions performed intend to continue resource management and preserve biodiversity, which has been developed traditionally by local communities, with a direct

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involvement and participating methodologies. Tiniguena (“This is our land”), IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) and FIBA (International Foundation for the Banc d'Arguin) operate in the Archipelago in cooperation with the Bijagos tabancas (villages) for ecosystem restoration and a more sustainable resource managing. Each proposal is presented to the kinglets assembly and to the population. Its goals focus on mainly education, sanitary prevention, environment protection and natural resources management, so as to assure a lasting development in the Archipelago and help the population on seeing their customs and habitat respected. It is also mandatory to describe the work done between 2001 and 2003 by the NGOs Wetlands International in the Bijagos Archipelago, with a project entitled “Wadden Sea Project”. It included the following partners: ODZH (Wetlands Protection and Development Organization), CESAG (Bird Study for Surveillance Centre in Guinea-Bissau), CECA (Centre for Education and Environmental Communication), CDPIIL (Centre for Promoting the Development of Local Initiatives), CESFF (Centre for the Study and Surveillance of Fauna and Flora), GPC (Coastal Planning Office), CWSS (BirdLife International and the Common Wadden Sea Secretariat). The main goal was to conjointly work for the conservation of the Wadden Sea in Europe and Guinea-Bissau's inter-stream areas, particularly in the Bijagos, based on solid ecological links that both areas share.

Although it does not act in natural resources monitoring, there are other NGOs that have been developing important works in supporting the population, among which the AMI Foundation, the Marquis of Valle Flor Institute (IMVF) and the Netherlandish Cooperation have to be mentioned. The Regional Partnership for the Conservation of the Coastal and Marine Area (PRCM) organizes on continuous basis training sessions with the NGOs and the governments from Wester Africa coastal countries, in order to promote conservation and sustainable development. The CESAG is an organization that includes technicians from several institutions and volunteers coming from different social sectors, and the action from the Centre, created in 2000, must be also highlighted.

The Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) at the complex formed by the Urok Islands (Formosa, Nago and Chediã) held its 7th General Assembly in the 6th of July, 2008, in Abu, Formosa. This annual meeting was an occasion for analyzing its status, as well as its management, and to propose and validate possible management decisions concerning the AMP's resource management. Speakers began by addressing the technical and financial balance sheet of the activities conducted in 2007, namely aid given to fishers, maritime surveillance, reinforcement of management structures, educational aid, environmental

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communication, promotion of local products and the improvement of transportation between the islands. An internal regulation proposal was also discussed. During the meeting, results and recommendation from the external evaluation panel regarding the Collaborative Management Project for Coastal Resources in the Urok Islands, executed by the Tiniguena NGO and with the technical and financial support from FIBA were introduced to the communities. The AMP's technical committee has also delivered recommendations related with this evaluation.

The communitarian AMP of the Urok Islands was officially created in 2005 after a long negotiation process between local individuals and under the coordination of Tiniguena. About a hundred representatives of the islands communities took part in the assembly's works. Several agents became involved in biodiversity conservation and resource management, namely the IBAP, the RBABB, the FISCAP, the CIPA and local authorities. All of these partners are engaged in supporting the efforts from the communities of the Urok islands and Tiniguena, main developer of the process, in order to consolidate the experience of collaborative management and reinforce institutional cooperation in the establishment and concerted management of the AMP. The project aims to support the people in materializing the management plan for the Urok AMP, promote a significant growth in revenues and quality of life for the inhabitants, and implement an intensive cultural work that can meet the social transformations that are occurring within the communities, especially among the youth. The project also intends to take advantage of the lessons gained from the dynamics involved and similar initiatives in the Bijagos Biosphere Reserve.

The management council from João Vieira Poilão and Orango National Parks, representing local communities, technical services administration and civil society has been debating the situation in both parks to improve its governing and the effectiveness of management measures, in which inspection, cooperation from the authorities and information levels are used. In this case, support in organizing and managing stocks of commodities allowed the communities to improve organization of communitarian market stores in the villages of Mengue and Ambaro, in the Canhabaque Island, through implementing and adapted control. At the Orango National Park, riparian communities in the lagoon had reflection meetings about the development of ecotourism around the hippopotamus. Management structures were set out and an activity schedule was approved. Park officers training has been done mainly in the bird reconnaissance area. The ecological model is also used in aquatic bird observation missions and the collection of photos from

local fish species intended to form a catalogue (CAMPREDON & CUQ, 2001).

Inspection missions have been able to discourage and in some cases intercept vessels that were fishing illegally inside the park, most of which coming from neighboring countries. Efforts have been carried out in cooperation with local authorities, having in mind the removal of fishermen illegally camped in the central area of the Orango National Park. Over the last years, multiple micro-projects were launched, appealing to NGOs and specialized State departments. These projects have increased revenue sources and have thus consolidated local economy. The credit system for micro-projects has set the population and it worked out effectively in some cases, due mainly to its simple application rules. First, it has managed to extend to a large number of economic activities (fishing, product valuation, horticulture and trade). Second, it served as a support for fishermen and led to a wider dynamics, progressively benefitting a considerable amount of people in the community. Diversification of activities and its appropriation by the community, as in the case of fish and palm oil trade, has spontaneously driven the settlement of a weekly market in some of the islands.

The IUCN has developed a literacy project for adults in the country, which was officially recognized by the Ministry of Education in 1996. Furthermore, a later inter-ministerial cooperation has allowed for the execution of theme works – in fishing, in technological improvement, etc.) that were implemented on a national level (BARAN & TOUS, 2000, p.27). All these activities have reinforced trust among the population. It has contributed to a bigger confidence towards governmental institution, and towards basis organizations able to manage resources. Many projects have failed, however, mainly in fishing, for the islands isolation, added to the shortage of health, educational and transportation services, has been a major barrier for economic development. The low involvement of governmental bodies hasn't succeeded to enable the viability of such initiatives. Some of the projects launched in the Bolama-Bijagos region have failed their objectives and did not use resources properly. The main causes for such failure were: lack of general regional planning in the design of development projects and insufficient integration between activities from different projects and institutions; lack of effective participation from the target population in the choice of priorities and, above all, in the communicational breach between projects, institutions and population; flaws default in conflict regulation and decision-making mechanisms – pragmatically and legally – in what comes to natural resource use (SAID & FERRAZ, 1996; NJOCK & WESTLUND, 2010).

NGO's that exist in Guinea-Bissau are incapable of effectively and on a large scale

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securing the continuation of projects, something what would allow at its own time a disconnection from the UICN. Yet, the work of these NGOs and other local associations develop, often implementing preservation and protection programmes through partnerships, has revealed it extremely important. It privileges the educational component, involving community groups for the resumption of diversified information actions and specific training programmes. These measures are seen as drivers for change and effort-mobilizing, revealing also a concern towards sustainability, promoting shifts in consumption habits and cultural practices in the community and adapting mentalities to local needs and environmental risks.

For over 25 years, donators such as the Chinese and Japanese cooperation, the French cooperation, the European Union and the African Bank for Development have largely financed development in fishing, with positive effects in security, employment and food. However, implementation of these projects has led to an exponential growth in small scale fishing capacity, especially around the Protected Marine Areas. Since those fishermen and their communities are the main consumers of coastal resources, they should also benefit from a more significant role in implementing action related to fishing management.

China has shown preferences to address oil producing countries, usually also rich in other natural resources and raw materials (natural gas, minerals-iron, copper, cobalt, precious stones, wood and fishing). China projects its soft power through international support (low interest or no interest loans, sometimes going as far as pardoning the debt, launching programs to “fight poverty”), technical assistance (health, agricultural, educational) and diplomacy, job creation and service provision (MENDES, 2008).

CONCLUSIONS

Social norms in Bijagos villages have suffered deep transformation in recent years. Numerous cultural contacts and successive changes in the political and economic situation ever since the post-independence period have affected the communities. The archipelago has been punished by its current condition, mainly in what comes to the excessive exploitation of fishing and tourism resources. The islands economic potential depends on the preservation of its primate ecosystems. The archipelago is under threat. A quarter of the islands are inhabited. Risks increase due to excessive fishing activities in reproduction areas and, more recently, due to anarchic tourist projects.

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Regarding space management and environmental protection, the archipelago has formed a Biosphere Reserve in 1996. This emerged from the need to preserve the fauna and the flora in its widest diversity. Having that in mind, the State of Guinea-Bissau created national parks in two groups of islands: the Southern Group in Orango (Orango National Park – PNO), a Centre for salt water hippopotamuses, and the Eastern Group in João Vieira Poilão (João Vieira Polão National Park – PNMJVP), a Centre for sea turtles. The Marine Community Protected Area within the islands of Formosa, Nago and Chediã (Urok) was also created. The government is concerned with planning and protecting animal and plant resources in order to preserve rare species, such as the baby turtle, and ensure the necessary genetic resources for future generations.

Socioeconomic development is the key for the reconstruction of countries like Guinea-Bissau, but assistance in such development must come to the envisaged beneficiaries. A complete transparency and strict responsibility are the requisites for implementing development assistance. Sustainable economic development is Guinea's present challenge. The country needs therefore to receive the necessary attention from international institutions and the European Union in order to be able to protect its people and its environment. Low financial value projects enable daily concerns to be addressed without inducing changes in traditional structures, its functioning and production. Development must not and shall not be fulfilled otherwise than in conformity with the respect for local values and the people's participation, making it qualitative and not so quantitative.

Cooperation between international preservation agencies such as UNESCO and IUCN and others through marine and regional coast preservation programmes and international investments may result in the development of a sustainable fishing industry. Such development could allow the Bijago people to carry on its traditional way of living and at the same time benefit from economic growth.

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