



Decentralisation in Practice in West Africa

Workshop in Uppsala

IIED and the Department of Cultural Anthropology and Ethnology at the University of Uppsala convened an international workshop on 'Decentralisation in Practice: power, livelihoods and cultural meaning in West Africa'. This took place from 4-6 May 2004, in Uppsala, and focused on the three themes of power, livelihoods and cultural meaning.

In the last decade, several West African countries have devolved political and administrative power to elected local government bodies in rural areas. This process of decentralisation varies from country to country in both the pace of change and the models adopted. However, in all cases its effectiveness depends on the extent to which central government is willing to transfer real power to local government bodies and on the legitimacy of these bodies. This issue forms the first of the workshop's three themes and raises a number of questions such as: who is 'capturing' the decentralisation process for their own benefit, how are marginalised groups able to participate, and what is the relationship between good governance and decentralisation?

The success of decentralisation also depends on the extent to which the newly elected government bodies can support community livelihoods, the second theme of the workshop. To achieve this, they need to manage natural resources effectively, provide appropriate and accessible basic services, seize new economic opportunities and manage the transfer of resources from central government. Cultural meaning, the third workshop theme, is also a crucial element affecting the decentralisation process, and includes the potential tensions between new, elected bodies and existing culturally-based but

possibly less democratic institutions.

The Workshop will provide an opportunity for scholars, NGOs, civil society and government practitioners, donor representatives and other interested individuals to debate the issues surrounding these three aspects of decentralisation in the West African context, and to discuss strategies that can help make decentralisation work to develop and empower local communities. The Workshop builds on a Sida and DANIDA-supported programme '*Making decentralisation work*', implemented by IIED in Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Senegal.

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