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An Ethnography of Endogenous Institutional Change in Community-Driven Development

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Abstract

Community-Driven Development (CDD) empowers target communities with control over development resources but is criticized for exogenously establishing parallel governance structures that fade away when the intervention ends. Could an unconditional direct transfer to a whole community catalyze endogenous institutional change by creating ‘a distinctive social space’ where actors draw upon modern and traditional discourses in the struggle over resources, institutions, and meanings? In this ethnographic study, we provided a Malian village with \$10,000 for a ‘development project’ and used the Actor-Oriented Approach to investigate how the project was socially constructed. The results reveal the local elites (customary authorities) taking early control over the project funds, and countervailing powers (young men and a “righteous” elder) constraining the customary authorities after they had sufficient time to mobilize opposition. Our findings suggest that issuing unconditional direct transfers could enable CDD to positively impact governance outcomes in other West African villages as well.

Keywords Community-driven development · Elite capture · Unconditional direct transfer

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Résumé

Le Développement Conduit par les Communautés (DCC) permet aux communautés concernées de contrôler les ressources de leur développement. Cette approche est cependant critiquée pour avoir établi de façon exogène des structures de gouvernance parallèles qui disparaissent lorsque l'intervention se termine. Un transfert direct inconditionnel à une communauté dans sa totalité pourrait-il catalyser un changement institutionnel endogène en créant « un espace social distinctif » où les acteurs s'appuient sur les discours modernes et traditionnels dans la lutte pour les ressources, les institutions et les significations ? Dans cette étude ethnographique, nous avons fourni à un village malien 10 000 dollars pour un « projet de développement » et avons utilisé l'approche axée sur les acteurs pour étudier la façon dont le projet a été socialement construit. Les résultats révèlent que les élites locales (autorités coutumières) ont très tôt pris le contrôle des fonds du projet, et qu'un contre-pouvoir (de jeunes hommes et une personne âgée souhaitant faire ce qui est « juste ») a pu faire pression sur les autorités coutumières, après avoir eu suffisamment de temps pour mobiliser l'opposition. Nos résultats suggèrent que l'envoi de transferts directs inconditionnels pourrait également permettre au DCC d'avoir un impact positif en matière de gouvernance dans d'autres villages d'Afrique de l'Ouest.

Introduction

The Elite Capture Critique and Parallel Governance Structures

Community-Driven Development (CDD) empowers target communities with control over development resources (Dongier et al. 2003), enabling the local community to choose their own project and control the budget (Arcand and Wagner 2016). The main criticism of CDD is its vulnerability to elite capture (Duchoslav 2013; Casey 2018; Fox 2020). “Elite capture” refers to local elites leveraging their political and economic status to appropriate the benefits of community development and decentralization programs (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005). The precursors of the elite capture critique emerged when scholars criticized bottom-up development approaches for empowering local communities without considering the harmful effects of social domination within these communities (Guijt and Shah 1998; Agarwal 2001). Platteau (2002, p. 111, 2004) elevated concerns for elite capture in CDD by arguing that “personalised relationships in tribal societies” result in community imperfections and elite capture. Many scholars have since criticized CDD for its vulnerability to elite capture (Araujo et al. 2008; Classen et al. 2008; Wong 2010; Baird et al. 2013; Rigon 2014).

However, analyses of aggregated CDD programs generally conclude that elite capture is unproblematic (Everatt and Gwagwa 2005; Kumar et al. 2005; Wong 2012; Casey 2018; White et al. 2018), while Mansuri and Rao's (2003) review of the World Bank's CDD programs concludes that elite capture in CDD is context specific. Some studies demonstrate cases of elites controlling CDD resources in equitable and pro-poor manners (Dasgupta and Beard 2007; Fritzen 2007; Saguin 2018). Furthermore, evidence has shown that the act of devolving power to communities



can undermine elite capture from a longer-term perspective—local elites may at first default into positions of power, and though nonelites might need time, they can mobilize and wrest control of resources from the elites (Manor 1999, p. 48; Fritzen 2007; Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013; Dufhues et al. 2015). While Platteau problematizes personalized governance structures as a source of elite capture, Pitcher (2009) argues that mutual respect and accountability are core features of personalized leadership.

The Sahel is a good example of a context where the elite capture critique is less relevant. The dryland agricultural production systems are saddled with climactic uncertainty and low levels of possible capital accumulation (Long 2003, p. 102; Bernard et al. 2008), thus creating egalitarian rural communities. Intra-village Gini Coefficient in the Sahel can be as low as 0.14 (Arcand and Wagner 2016). Furthermore, the primary agricultural constraint in many parts of the region is labor, not land (Berry 1993, p. 184; Becker 1996; Bulte et al. 2018, pp. 61, 75), and labor-scarcity gives the nonelite more bargaining power. Also, the rural elite often exert power over the nonelite by monopolizing the arable land and controlling the nonelites' access to agricultural livelihoods (Scott 1985; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2004; Galasso and Ravallion 2005; Pan and Christiaensen 2012), which is harder to accomplish in a labor-constrained system.

Nevertheless, CDD programs have responded to the elite capture critique by establishing parallel governance structures in the target villages (Mansuri and Rao 2013). Scholars argue that practitioners *must* intervene in village politics to prevent elite capture within CDD (Kumar 2003; Classen et al. 2008). CDD projects spend 3–12 months (and a third of project budgets) 'training' the community to make inclusive decisions and manage resources transparently, and condition CDD funds on the communities adopting these management practices (Fritzen 2007; Casey 2011, 2018; Lawson 2011). This approach to CDD has inspired the second main criticism of CDD projects: NGO training coupled with the community's experience of CDD do not sustainably impact local institutions and even hinder the capacity of local governance systems (Mansuri and Rao 2003; Kumar et al. 2005; Magumula 2006; Casey 2018; White et al. 2018; Anderson 2019). The World Bank's review of their own CDD programs claims they have positive/mixed impact on governance outcomes (Wong 2012). However, the only meta-analysis of rigorous CDD data shows that local institutions return to their normal power structures when the project is over (Casey 2018).

Creating Space for Countervailing Power in CDD: An Actor-Oriented Approach

For Norman Long, the communities targeted by development are already sites of dynamic social change. Project participants strategically deploy a mixture of modern and traditional discourses in the struggle over meanings, resources, and power (Long and Long 1992, p. 26). When rural actors incorporate external cultural resources into their own lifeworlds, they "*reposition the modern within the familiar*", weakening the associations with dominant cultural authority. This creates "distinctive social spaces where contests for [local] authority are fought out, often as a prelude to new power



claims” (Arce and Long 2000, p. 9). Development interventions, such as CDD, introduce new discontinuities and encourage social conflict (Long 2003, p. 41)—they are arenas where actors mobilize social networks and various discourses in the pursuit of their interests (Long 2003, p. 59).

Fox (2020) observes that interventions promoting participatory governance are often unable to build countervailing power. Long’s Actor-Oriented approach could provide insight here. Long (2003, p. 38) argues that overtly trying to control patterns of political development from an exogenous position of economic and cultural power can impede endogenous social change. While project participants often defang and incorporate foreign cultural resources, they remain suspicious of Western influence (Arce and Long 2000, p. 9). Top-down control leads project participants to divert some of their “energies from the positive pursuit of indigenously defined social change, to the negative goal of resisting cultural, political, and economic domination” (Banuri 1990, p. 33). Imposing parallel governance structures could instigate resistance for the values that CDD promotes (inclusivity and transparency). At the very least, parallel governance structures effectively settle these larger governance issues for the duration of the project, inadvertently removing them from the local power struggles where meanings, dispositions, and alliances are forged.

With an unconditional direct transfer to a whole community, CDD could catalyze endogenous institutional change by creating ‘a distinctive social space’ where the elite and countervailing powers deploy discontinuous discourses in the struggle over cultural and physical resources, knowledge, and meanings. Some research in the decentralization debate already shows nonelites can wrest power from the local elites after they have time to mobilize opposition (Manor 1999, p. 48; Fritzen 2007; Lund and Saito-Jensen 2013; Dufhues et al. 2015). A few case studies show that CDD programs can effectively build off a community’s existing governance systems (Arnall et al. 2013; McLoughlin et al. 2022). However, debates in development studies rarely address the role of countervailing powers in local governance and accountability (Fox 2020). We tried to address this gap in the literature and the criticism of CDD’s parallel governance structures by providing an unconditional direct transfer (\$10,000) to a village in rural Mali. We used an ethnographic approach and Long’s (2004) concept of social interface to investigate how an unconditional CDD project is socially constructed at critical moments of conflict and negotiation.

We start the analysis by describing the three main power centers in the village: (1) the chief and his family as the customary authority, (2) the youths (men under 40) as the countervailing power, and (3) a village elder with a reputation as a ‘righteous man’ floating between the groups. We then recount the first two community meetings for the project and the struggles that these meetings set in motion. Finally, we discuss the participants’ analyses of these struggles and discuss the implications for the parallel governance structures established by typical CDD programs.



Table 1 Average number of livestock and cement houses owned by village leaders and nonelites

Owner	Donkeys	Cattle	Sheep	Goats	Cement houses
Village leaders ($N=5$, the chief, his 3 advisors, and “the righteous man”)	2.0	3.6	1.4	2.2	1.6
Nonelites ($N=24$, the 24 other heads of household)	2.4	0.8	1.8	1.9	1.0

The fieldwork was conducted by the first author; the following sections are reported in the first person

Methodology

Village Selection

We selected a small Khassonké village (with 225 inhabitants) in western Mali because the first author lived in the village from 2003 to 2005, spoke the local language, and already built trust with the residents. Everyone in the research village speaks Khassonké and Bambara. Bambara is the lingua franca in Mali, and Khassonké is spoken by a small minority. The two languages are closely related (native Bambara speakers can understand most of what is said in Khassonké), and both are part of the Mandé ethno-linguistic group.

The village is characterized by land abundance and low levels of capital accumulation—everyone in the target village reported that they had access to more land than they could conceivably farm. Also, the village leaders did not own significantly more livestock or cement houses (two primary stores of local wealth) than others in the village, see Table 1. Nevertheless, rural Malian society is a patrilineal gerontocracy (Deubel 2017). The chief and other elders remain distinguished by their cultural authority and political power, if not their wealth.

Research Methodology

Long’s concept of social interface analyzes how discontinuities in knowledge, cultural interpretations, and interests are reconciled and transformed through social conflict (Long 2003, p. 50). The interface approach focuses on key conflicts and negotiations that reveal the different actors’ capacities to shape their social and material worlds. For Long (2003, p. 17), an actor exhibits agency (and power) by enrolling others in their ‘projects’. Actors exert this power by manipulating cultural resources, knowledge, and social networks. However, all agents bring their unique lifeworlds (experiences, interests, and knowledge) to the social interface; they are rarely ever completely enrolled in another’s project. Thus, this analysis focused on the struggles over the social meanings attributed to events and conflicts, as participants tried to enroll each other in their ‘projects’.

Long argues the nodal points of conflict and negotiation (interfaces) can only be identified in situ, using an ethnographic method (Long 2003, p. 50). In early 2021, I provided \$10,000 to the village for a community development project. I was provided a room in the chief’s homestead and spent my time interviewing and



observing participants in all 29 homesteads in the village. I lived in the community for the four-month duration of the project to investigate how collective and individual aspirations are negotiated, brought to fruition, contested, and evaluated within the community. I transcribed 5 community meetings and 7,800 words from the village diaspora's Whatsapp group. I was also present for several impromptu meetings where various actors disputed and negotiated with the chief. Finally, I conducted 76 semi-structured interviews with 27 people and 109 unstructured interviews with 56 people to capture their analyses and reports of the key conflicts and negotiations. In the unstructured interviews, I allowed the participant to guide the conversation. In semi-structured interviews, I started by asking informants what they thought about recent project events and slowly inched toward more pointed questions about recent conflicts and village power dynamics. I experimented with many interviewing methods: interviewing informants while going for walks in the bush, sitting under a tree safely outside of earshot of the village, and interviewing two female friends together. I also employed negative case analysis, the technique of consciously seeking counterevidence that challenged my pet theories and default analyses (Lincoln and Guba 1985).

Limitations

The results of this research cannot be confidently extrapolated across the Sahel or even western Mali. As the villagers and Long (1984) say: every village is different. Villages can vary widely in terms of their ethnic composition, social cohesion, infrastructure, production systems, employment rates, women's empowerment, governance systems (some chiefs are democratically elected), and resistance to change. The idiosyncratic socio-cultural conditions in the target village have considerable explanatory power of a village's project results. Empowering local communities entails that the communities generate the reasons why social events unfold in the way they do. As we travel further down the path of devolving powers to local communities, we concomitantly devolve explanatory power.

This research is only relevant to contexts where the local elite are not necessarily wealthier than the nonelite. However, egalitarian communities with low Gini-Coefficients abound in rural West Africa (Lund and Benjaminsen 2001, p. 300; Bernard et al. 2008; Arcand and Wagner 2016; Bulte et al. 2018, p. 67).

Funding was not found for this research. The ethical committee's approval of this research recommended that the community not be informed that the researchers funded it. I told the community that I raised the money from "a donor", and nobody asked for more details. In effort to mitigate my elite status in the village, I actively worked to position myself outside of power struggles in the village. I did not take sides in disputes, and I was polite and passive. To mitigate bias in my analysis, I focused on the participatory coproduction of knowledge with the target community. I continuously discussed my observations and analyses with the participants and engaged them in conversations about why and how my understanding diverged from theirs (employing negative case analysis). Also, the discussion section below highlights the participants' analyses.



Existing Village Power Dynamics

While investigating the history of community management in the village, I identified three powerholders struggling over local institutions: the chief, the righteous man, and the youths.

The Chief is the Chief (Dugutigi ye Dugutigi ye)

The chief was the first of the three main powers I observed in the village. Malian chieftaincy is inherited along patrilineal lines (Becker 1990), and the chief in the target village succeeded his uncle because his uncle's only two male sons, Molibali¹ and Wusubi, moved to the capital to pursue lucrative professional careers. Everyone in the village calls the chief by his title, "dugutigi" – dugu (village) + tigi (owner of/responsible for). People in the village occasionally say "Dugutigi ye dugutigi ye" as an affirmation of the chief's authority.

The chief has numerous roles, responsibilities, and powers in the village. According to everybody in the village, the chief's primary responsibilities are to protect and develop the village. As several informants said: you cannot do anything in the village without getting the chief's permission. For example, when government officials or NGOs come to the village, they must talk to the chief first. Another major role of the chief is mediating disputes within the community as well as disputes between outsiders and community members, like when the cattle of a nomadic Fulani (an ethnic group historically associated with herding) eat a villager's crops. The chief is also charged with providing farmland to new families who intend to move to the village. In sum, the chief is the leader of the local governance structure.

Complicating any simple narratives of village kleptocracy, the chief's family has attracted considerable development funds for this village and oriented them toward the village's development goals. In the last ten years, the village acquired three solar pumps, two water towers, a new borehole, running water in the village, and a community garden (also with running water). The chief's cousin, Molibali (a high-ranking military officer), recruited a German NGO and together they co-financed these projects. Molibali's brother, Wusubi, installed and built all of them. In 2015, the chief's family established a Water Management Committee, led by the chief, that collects \$0.50 per household per month. The income was kept in a community lock-box and used to maintain the pumps.

Ibrahim is a Righteous Man (Ibrahim ye tinyetigi ye)

Ibrahim is essentially the village's second in command, but he was not appointed by the chief. Village consensus has elevated him to this status. Most people in the village say that Ibrahim occupies this leadership role because he is a tinyetigi – tinye

¹ All the names have been changed to protect the participants' identity.



(truth) + tigi (owner of/responsible for).² Tinyetigi is often translated as ‘a righteous or right person’. Informants said that a person is a tinyetigi if they are honest, open, and courageous. Two informants independently said that if you give Ibrahim \$2 to hold on to, and you come back to him a year later and ask for that money, he will return to you the same \$2. Another informant said that Ibrahim is a tinyetigi because he has the courage to declare the truth, even when two parties are in a heated dispute. “Ibrahim is a righteous man because he fears nothing; he hides nothing.” An outspoken youth, Adama, argued that speaking the truth is a necessary but not a sufficient condition to becoming a tinyetigi. Adama said that Ibrahim is a tinyetigi because, one, he is an elder. Two, he is wealthy; he has a government pension. And three, he can defend himself when people do not like the truth. Adama flexed his arms to show strength, but this was a reference to Ibrahim’s force of personality. The chief’s main advisor (and staunch defender) also acknowledged Ibrahim’s strength and courage, but he was the only person in the village who did not mention “tinyetigi” as a reason for Ibrahim’s status. The advisor said: “Nothing can happen in the village unless the chief agrees. But if there is community work to be done, the chief and Ibrahim lead it... because [Ibrahim] is courageous. I can’t do that. I can’t tell people what to do, to work, I am not courageous. And that is why [Ibrahim] is the leader.” However, Ibrahim is more than a coleader of community work. He occupies three roles that have been stripped from the chief. Ibrahim is (1) the leader of the Water Management Committee, (2) he manages the community lockbox, and (3) he is the women’s trusted advisor, and he holds on to their collective savings. Ibrahim manages all of these public funds via transparent committees that require the presence of multiple committee members to conduct all financial transactions. Finally, while the chief calls the community meetings and is the first to speak, Ibrahim is typically the second speaker.

The Suppression of Dissent and the Youths

Rural Malian villages are best characterized as a patrilineal gerontocracy (Deubel 2017). Scholars have observed village leaders (elders) suppressing dissent to create the appearance of consensus in other West African villages belonging to the same ethno-linguistic group (Mandé), and it is often associated with the “hanging heads” phenomenon (Murphy 1990; Ferme 1998). “Those subordinate in social relations are often compelled for self-protection and survival to pretend agreement and loyalty with the dominant and to conceal resentment and disagreement” (Murphy 1990, p. 26). The respondents’ inclusion of courage as a central quality of a tinyetigi is indicative of the social pressures a tight-knit community can inflict on someone expressing unpopular opinions or opposing the leaders. These pressures can take material and supernatural forms. In the material realm, poor families ask the wealthier families in the village for help in times of need (Kumar 2003), which often occurs in bad rainfall years. This intra-community aid is a crucial safety net

² Tinyetigi is not a nickname or a formal role. It is the reason people give for Ibrahim’s leadership roles.



for poor households (Bernard et al. 2008), and members of poorer families in the village reported that they hesitate to publicly contradict the heads (elder males) of the wealthier families. The social pressures to follow the elites can also take a supernatural form, via the marabou (witch doctor). For example, at a community meeting several years ago, Adama (an outspoken youth) opposed the chief's desire to sell the tree sapping rights to the Fulani herders because "it kills the trees, and that money disappears from the community lockbox anyway." The chief and his advisors were in favor of the sale, and the community decided it should continue. According to Adama, after that meeting, his mother told him to tone it down because she was scared someone would go to a marabou and they were too poor to withstand a curse.

Despite these social pressures, the youths (men under 40) comprise the third power in the village. Three youths in particular had a history of contesting the chief's decisions, and all three had steady incomes (potentially making them less dependent on community systems of mutual aid). Chiaka is a teacher in a neighboring village, Lassa is a guardian at a nearby hospital, and Adama has a brother who sends back steady remittances. In 2016, the youths led an informal investigation of the chief's expenditures of the Water Management funds. They found that the chief was skimming money from the lockbox, and they publicly accused him at a community meeting. The youths mobilized others (including the chief of a neighboring village) and pushed the chief at a community meeting to relinquish control of the lockbox and leadership of the Water Management Committee. The chief fought back, but village consensus was against him. Since 2017, Ibrahim (the tinyetigi) has been the president of the Water Management Committee and controller of the lockbox. Ibrahim established a transparent committee that required the presence of multiple committee members for all financial transactions, and nobody has contested his leadership.

The CDD Intervention

Upon arrival in the village, I asked for a private meeting with the chief and his main advisor and asked their permission to provide \$10,000 for a CDD project for the village and remain in the village for 4–6 months to record and publish the results.

The First Community Meeting

The chief called a community meeting on my first evening, and he invited the women to join. Women are rarely invited to the men's official community meetings. When the women do attend these meetings, it is understood that they should not speak. Normally, the chief calls a meeting for the women the evening after the men's meeting, where he and Ibrahim inform the women what the men decided. The chief opened the meeting and explained that the village would receive \$10,000 for a project of their choosing. He wrapped up his opening remarks with: "We will converse and choose one project together, and then we will work together. [The Project that]



is easy (*ka nogo*)³ for us, we should say. I will give you time to think about your ideas. It is easier to help a lizard than a frog... The project that we agree on, we will tell Peter and we will do it together. Now I invite others to speak.” Ibrahim spoke next. He argued that they should limit their discussion to three possible projects: a school, a health center, and the garden. Ibrahim then advocated for the school. An advisor to the chief spoke next. He also argued that they should limit the discussion to those three projects because they are the only projects that attract government and NGO investment. The advisor also advocated for a school. Then the chief spoke again, saying: “Everyone is in agreement to build the school.” Only three men had spoken in a meeting attended by at least 60 people, and the chief already declared consensus. Six more men spoke, all arguing for the school. They believed the money would be enough to build three school rooms. One of the outspoken youths, Adama, was the tenth person to speak. He acknowledged that they should build a school but argued some of the money should be used to help the women with their irrigation problems in the garden. This was the only moment in the meeting that the school was somewhat contested. Modi (the leader of the men’s group) responded, claiming that they cannot use the money to improve the garden because I would not be able to take pictures of it to send to the donors, because the garden already exists, and the photos would not be of the project they funded. The women did not speak at the meeting, but the women’s leader whispered to the town crier (griot) during the meeting that the women supported the men’s decision.

The interface approach reveals the discontinuities in knowledge, power, and cultural interpretation that were perpetuated at this critical moment of social conflict and negotiation. The participants echoed traditional and modern development discourses in the struggle over resources and meanings. The chief drew upon the traditional discourse to argue that they are more likely to help themselves (like the lizard that climbs, compared to the frog that merely hops along) if they focus their discussion on easy projects. One informant explained: “Proverbs are the words of our ancestors, and it reminds us of them.” The chief also drew on a traditional value for consensus politics as the best driver of their decision. Meanwhile, Ibrahim and an advisor to the chief both echoed the international development discourse surrounding notions of sustainability to limit the discussion to three projects. According to them, the importance of sustainability dictates that they select a project that will attract future government and donor support. They showed their capacity to alter this foreign cultural resource (and make it their own) when they simultaneously contested it by arguing that a ubiquitous development goal—that an intervention sustain itself after the funding ends—is not feasible. Later in the meeting, Modi also echoed the modern development discourse (indirectly referencing the requirements of Monitoring and Evaluation) to argue against spending the money on the garden because I would not be able to take photos of another’s garden project. As Norman Long

³ The Bambara French dictionary defines *ka nogo* as easy or suitable. Ibrahim reported the chief meant both easy and suitable, “because we put those together to mean one thing.” However, the chief reported in a follow-up interview that he meant *ka nogo* as easy.



predicts, this project was a social space where actors utilized fragments of modern and traditional discourses in the struggle over resources and meanings.

The Second Community Meeting

After the first meeting, Ibrahim said that the \$10,000 would be managed by a transparent committee, appealing to the modern governance structures promoted by development programs. A few days later, the chief's cousin, Wusubi, and his son arrived in the village. Wusubi is an entrepreneur from the capital who builds schools. His son is a mason in a nearby village. The chief called a second community meeting (for the men only) where Wusubi informed the men that \$10,000 was not enough to build three standard-sized schoolrooms. It would only cover two small classrooms. After much debate, the men agreed to Wusubi's plan. They also decided that the youths would clear the land, dig the foundation, and haul water from the well for the cement work, all as unpaid labor. Finally, the chief declared that the money would be sent directly to Wusubi's bank account, and Wusubi would manage the project. The chief appealed to traditional management system of entrusting the village elders. Ibrahim and several youths stated that once this decision was made, they could not ask for receipts of their expenditures because it would be perceived as an insult. In a follow-up interview, Ibrahim said: "There are two ways of doing the work. We could have set up a committee that manages the money and shows receipts. Or, we could have entrusted one person to do the work. If he does good work, he will receive blessings. If the work is not good, then it will shame him." However, several outspoken youth rejected the traditional method of entrusting village elders. The youth who eventually became the teacher at the school said: "if they don't show receipts, that means they ate the money."

The Struggle Over Meanings, Resources, and Local Institutions

While digging the foundation, Adama (one of the three outspoken youths) loudly declared that the school's outline was too small for \$10,000 and everybody should stop digging. He was quickly quieted by the elders, and no one supported his challenge. However, in that first week, most of the youths stopped hauling water to the construction site. With the cement-mixing water precariously low, Lassa (another of the three outspoken youths) called Wusubi and told him that the youths of the village (including the village diaspora) had decided the construction must stop because the school was too small for \$10,000. Lassa went to the construction site to transmit this message to the project mason, Wusubi's son. That afternoon, the chief outmaneuvered the youths by commandeering the water that the women use to irrigate the community garden—the blue line in Image 1 is the hose that transported the water. The chief told the women that they would have to get water from the well (600 m from the garden) and they were not allowed to get the water from the village spigots (150 m from the garden). The chief called a community meeting that night. He



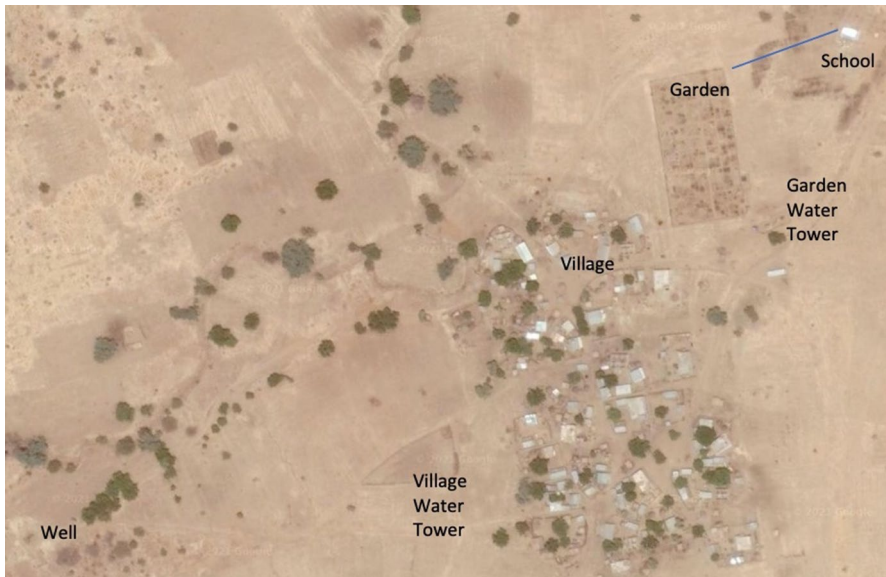


Image 1 Map of the village and key infrastructure (Google Maps, June, 2021)02

opened the meeting with four messages. One, the youths' accusations were in bad faith because everyone agreed to the size of the school at the second meeting. Two, the youths did not have the power to stop the work because they did not contribute any money. Three, "there are a hundred youths here, they just do not know where their fathers came from. You do not get to be in charge this way. You have to stay what you are" (in other words, "know your place"). Finally, the chief said, "People are saying that the chief said that the women cannot water their vegetables because it is his garden. That is right. It is his garden, and nobody can water their plants until the school is finished." Adama (an outspoken youth) responded first. He stood over the chief yelling that they refuse to get water for the school because it is too small for \$10,000, and he's a bad chief. Other youths escorted Adama away, and three elders spoke in succession, all calling for a return to civil discourse. According to Adama, the chief went to his homestead the next day and told him that he was no longer allowed to respond to him in a public setting. I found Adama a few days later making mud bricks. He said: "What can I do against the leaders. I work with mud. Wusubi is an entrepreneur, [and] the chief is the chief."

The women mobilized cultural resources, meanings, and their social network to contest the chief's decision about the irrigation water. After an impromptu meeting at the garden, the women sent their one of their leaders, Juku, to remind the chief that the women paid to have the solar pump in the garden connected to the grid (so the pump could run at night too). Thus, he was taking something that did not belong to him. The chief responded by reminding her that the whole village (including the garden) belonged to him. Juku was upset. She said that directly after her meeting with the chief, she went to Ibrahim to express her exasperation. A few days later, Ibrahim and a chief from a neighboring village each had long discussions with the



chief about letting the women use the village spigots to water their garden. Ibrahim threatened to shut off the village's water source entirely. Ibrahim gained control of the Water Management Committee after the chief was accused of skimming from the lockbox, and now this lost power was leveraged against him. The chief relented and allowed the women to use the village spigots to water their garden.

A Malian village's diaspora can be active in hometown discussions of political accountability, driving local development and disputes (Hagberg and Koné 2019). Diaspora groups around the world use social media to remain politically active in their place of origin (Olabode 2016; Titifanue et al. 2017). The diaspora in this village (predominately youths) learned of the school drama through an existing Whatsapp group that the diaspora used to stay connected to the village (the village youths and I are also in the group). Most of the diaspora stated on the group chat that the chief stole at least a third of the money. One youth contested the source of the chief's customary authority (as the founding family), saying that his ancestors "did not tunnel underground and pop up here" nor did "Allah drop them from the sky." One of the diaspora asked a mason who builds schools how much it costs to build two standard school rooms (roughly double the size of the school Wusubi built) and forwarded the mason's message to the group. The mason explained that two standard school rooms cost roughly \$26,000 to build. The next message on the group chat said: "We heard it, all masons are not the same... Wusubi should have said: 'the money was not enough and I do not want to betray you...'" Wusubi was a little wrong, and we too spoke without thinking. [The mason] knows better than us." The following message struck a similar tone, implying Wusubi was still wrong. However, the meanings they had already mobilized eventually overcame their fact-finding mission. The messages shifted back to blaming Wusubi, arguing that he must have eaten some of the money because they all know that \$10,000 can build a larger structure. The conversation on the Whatsapp group then shifted again, the diaspora members said they would create a development association in the village, they would all pay \$90 per year to fund the association, they would put Ibrahim in charge, and the chief would never eat the village's money again. Ibrahim appeared pleased by this outcome—he had been telling people that their Whatsapp group was just a "chat group" and the diaspora could not effectively intervene in village politics unless they started sending money to the whole community (and not just individual households).

The chief was upset about his family name being sullied on the Internet. The chief called his older sister and Wusubi to come to the village from the capital city to remind the youths of their place. People were concerned that the chief's sister and Wusubi would mobilize their wealth and social networks to get the outspoken youths arrested, and the village elders intervened. The elders formed a delegation (including the chief's advisors and Ibrahim) and went to the chief's homestead to apologize on behalf of the youths. The chief called off Wusubi's 'visit' the next day. That same week, the diaspora sent a representative to the village, and he brokered a truce with the chief too. The diaspora's representative promised the youths would stop ruining the chief's family name on the Internet if the diaspora could establish a development association in the village. They agreed that this new association would (1) be funded by the diaspora and (2) be led by Ibrahim and a transparent committee.



The chief privately said that he made these concessions because: “It’s all talk. They won’t manage to set up an office and none of them will actually give money to the fund.” The representative of the diaspora and Ibrahim also claimed this new association would control future development projects as well.

When the school construction finished, the chief called a meeting and declared that the school was complete and Wusubi was too busy to come to the village to present his work. Ibrahim spoke next, saying that Wusubi’s work was bad because Wusubi initially argued that the money was insufficient to build a bigger school, but finished the school with large piles of leftover sand, gravel, and cement bricks. Chika (one of the outspoken youths) and several elders repeated Ibrahim’s argument. The chief’s main advisor, who always defended him, did not come to the meeting. The chief was alone in his defense. Only one of the chief’s other advisors attended the meeting, but he too expressed his disapproval of Wusubi’s absence. Also, when the chief commandeered the garden water, this advisor privately called the chief a dictator and questioned if the community should *allow* him to continue to be the chief.

During the of Eid al-Fitr festival, one month after the school’s completion, Ibrahim called a meeting at the chief’s concession to establish the School Management Committee. This was the first meeting that was not called by the chief. Leaders of the diaspora had also returned to the village for the holiday, intending to establish their development association at that time as well. They attended Ibrahim’s meeting and proposed that they fold their development association into the School Management Committee, with the understanding that the School Management Committee would eventually broaden its scope to other development projects. They selected the committee members at the meeting. They decided the diaspora would pay \$90 per person per year to the School Management Committee and men in the village would each pay \$9 per year. Ibrahim assumed leadership of the committee. Juku (the woman who confronted the chief about the garden) was the only woman on the committee. Lassa (the outspoken youth who demanded the construction stop) and two diaspora members who publicly accused the chief of eating the money were also on the committee. The chief spoke at the end of the meeting, declaring the School Management Committee would do good work, even though he was not on the committee. Ibrahim declared that he would lead a transparent committee. Ibrahim had earlier tried to convince the diaspora to contribute money to the whole community (in exchange for a political voice). He also tried to convince the community to adopt transparent management committees (led by him). By the end of this meeting, he had successfully enrolled a plurality of actors into his main ‘projects’.

Discussion

The Youths: Bad Faith Actors or Countervailing Power?

Were the youths unfairly skeptical of the chief’s authority, or were they the only ones who had the courage to stand up against a corrupt chief? I showed the blueprints of the school to three masons and two NGO technicians in the nearby city and



Table 2 Bids and estimations of the school's actual cost (based on blueprints)

Three masons' bids to construct the school (\$)	Two NGO Technicians' Estimations of the school's construction cost (\$)
9174	10,550
6880	5137
5871	

informed them the village would take care of the water and the foundation for free. The three masons were asked to bid for a contract to build the school, while the two NGO technicians were asked to provide their own estimation of the school's cost. The table below shows the outcome of this investigation (Table 2).

When asked about the range of estimations, one of the NGO technicians said that it depends on the quality of the construction. He said, "It's the region. Everyone is suspicious of their leaders, and they are constantly accusing them of eating project funds." One of the chief's advisors made a similar point when he said: "When you control community funds, you cannot kill a chicken without being accused of eating the money."

The chief and Wusubi's actions were not above suspicion. They knew that the village was suspicious of its leaders before the project started, and yet they chose to manage the money with zero transparency and to spend the money in a way that prioritized the structure's unobservable features (quality) at the expense of its observable features (size). They could have avoided the conflict if they built a low-quality large school with no budgetary transparency or if they built a high-quality small school with greater budgetary transparency, but they chose neither of those. One can safely exclude the possibility that they just did not care about the conflict – they were visibly upset by the accusations. Thus, they either eschewed budgetary transparency and claimed high-quality construction so they could eat some of the money, or perhaps their traditional habitus prevented them from seeing what appears obvious in retrospect: they would be publicly accused, and the chief risked losing control of another governance structure.

The Participants' Analyses

The youths provided a complex analysis of the project. Lassa, Chiaka, and Adama independently articulated that it was the chief's ability to set the stage (calling Wusubi to the village before the second meeting) that enabled him to steal some of the money. Chiaka claimed that they could not contest Wusubi's control of the project finances when Wusubi had already driven up to the village, ostensibly to help his natal village. All three of them also believed that once Wusubi controlled the funds, the village failed to mobilize against the chief because too many people were afraid that the chief and his family would mobilize their wealth and social network to get people arrested. Adama wished he had informed the diaspora earlier because that might have enabled them to reject the school's size before construction started. When asked why the youths and the village leaders did not understand each other,



Lassa articulated a response that both acknowledged and refused to acknowledge their hierarchal cultural norms. He said: “The youths do not yet know that they must respect their elders and the village authorities. We say what we want and fight for what we think is right, but you change as you get older, and you come to understand that you cannot insult your elders, but we have not learned that yet, and it is good that we do not hold our tongues. We speak the truth and get it out there, and that is when the chief publicly insulted everyone in the village, he said, ‘you forget that your fathers came to this village and asked for a place.’ And Ibrahim said that something must be wrong with anyone [the chief] who insults the whole village. We did that.” Here, Lassa accepted the traditional gerontocracy and treated its rejection as a youthful phase that serves a valuable function to the village because it leads to important conversations/judgements among the elders.

Publicly, Ibrahim struck a middle ground in the various struggles, but privately he was very critical of the chief. He publicly argued that the youths’ failure to object at the second meeting disqualified their objection after the work started. Ibrahim maintained his working relationship with the chief throughout the project. I found the chief and Ibrahim often in the chief’s homestead discussing the conundrums of the village. When the project closed, Ibrahim argued that Wusubi managed the work poorly because of the leftover materials, but he did not accuse Wusubi and the chief of eating the money. Ibrahim worked to convince his fellow community members that the chief and Wusubi’s error was technical not moral, and they should all forget their grievances. Privately however, on my last day in the village, Ibrahim confided to me that he agreed with the youths. Ibrahim said that the chief invited Wusubi to the village behind their backs and they ate some of the money, but if he joined the youths publicly, it would be said that he was creating a revolt, because people in the village listen to him. He decided the best course of action was to remain quiet. “At that point, the best thing we could do was let the leaders fall into the well. Then we could do the work right.” Ibrahim often said that the village can only move forward if everyone stood together. He led a *constrained countervailence* against the chief, that operated within the boundaries of his prioritization of village unity. Ibrahim maintained his close working relationship with the chief despite publicly opposing him, privately criticizing him, and slowly acquiring his power over local institutions.

The chief and his main advisor did not want to talk about the conflict, and they became agitated when asked about it. They argued that nobody knows the cost of building a school, and the youths just wanted to undermine the chief’s authority and destroy the village’s peace. However, they alone promoted this narrative—they lost the struggle over the social meanings attributed to the management of the funds.

The Researchers’ Analyses/Implications for CDD

The literature on typical CDD projects shows that exposing a community to a parallel governance structure does not convince the local elites to give up their power, nor does it enable or inspire the nonelites to contest the elites’ power. The implicit assumption was that villagers would internalize this new way of thinking and adapt



their customary institutions. However, perhaps this assumption proved erroneous because CDD rationality was seen as part of an exogenous donor project domain and not part of the endogenous village governance domain.

Our hands-off approach to CDD promoted endogenous institutional change by creating a 'distinctive social space' where the elites and countervailing powers deployed discontinuous discourses in the struggle over meanings and cultural and physical resources. On the basis of customary authority, the chief defaulted into control over community institutions. He was the first to control the Water Management Committee, the community lockbox, and the resources for this CDD project. However, countervailing powers repeatedly seized control over these local institutions by mobilizing foreign cultural resources and outrage against the traditional authorities. By eschewing parallel governance structures, an unconditional cash transfer created space for countervailing powers to struggle over the village's central governance issues.

Other research in the decentralization literature already shows that local elites default into positions of power and nonelites can wrest power from the elites when they have time to mobilize opposition. Our ethnographic plunge into a single Malian village explored what happens when the nonelites' plodding capacity to mobilize opposition is applied to CDD. A labor-constrained agricultural system, an active diaspora, youths with stable employment, and a rapidly modernizing rural milieu coalesced and countervailed traditional authorities. Our findings suggest that unconditional direct transfers could enable CDD to positively impact governance outcomes in other West African villages as well.

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