

**Building Governance Capacity in Rural Niger: A Study of Decentralization and
Good Governance Policy as Experienced in a Local Village**

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By Sarah Lyon-Hill

Abstract

Niger, a northwest African country with several systemic barriers to development, has made education a priority. In an effort to improve the national education system, Niger has implemented a decentralization program. This study examines the perceptions of local school actors concerning this decentralization policy, which prescribes improving access and quality to education and strengthening institutional capacity. Local interviews and an analysis of relevant policy documents reveal limited policy implementation at the local level accompanied by a lack of state capacity, accountability and responsiveness to local school needs. Moreover, interviewees perceive a decline in education quality due to these reforms. While policy review documents focus on building institutional capacity at the central and regional government levels, the locality examined has responded as best it can to the needs of its schools. These local efforts are hampered by few resources, limited capacity and understanding of the importance of education by citizens, as well as a mistrust in government institutions, including schools, among local community members. Community leadership, development of participatory public space and trust building, could improve local education capacity to a certain extent, however, strong central government that provides additional resources and builds the capacities of school staff is necessary.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

<i>COGES</i>	<i>Comité de Gestion des Etablissements Scolaire (School Management Committees)</i>
<i>CSO</i>	<i>Civil Society Organization</i>
<i>DFID</i>	<i>Department for International Development (UK)</i>
<i>DREBA</i>	<i>Ministry for Basic Education and Literacy</i>
<i>DRESS</i>	<i>Ministry for Secondary, Higher Education, Research and Technology</i>
<i>IMF</i>	<i>International Monetary Fund</i>
<i>INGO</i>	<i>International Nongovernmental Organization</i>
<i>NIGETIP</i>	<i>Niger public works employment project</i>
<i>NGO</i>	<i>Nongovernmental Organization</i>
<i>PDDE</i>	<i>Programme Décennal de Développement de l'Education</i>
<i>PRS</i>	<i>Poverty Reduction Strategy</i>
<i>UNDP</i>	<i>United Nations Development Programme</i>

I. INTRODUCTION

In the past two decades, Niger, a sub-Saharan country in Northwest Africa, has undergone several governmental decentralization initiatives intended to build the capacity of localities to govern and deliver services to its citizens. This thesis explores how effectively national policy efforts to decentralize education have been interpreted and implemented in local communities. According to many development groups and analysts, good governance principles should guide capacity-building initiatives. Like many countries in the developing world, the Nigerien national government has adopted and incorporated these precepts into its national reform policy.

To gain a better understanding of specific components and effects of this decentralized reform process on local governance structures, this project was limited to the primary education system, including grades one through five (1-5), in an exemplar rural village in Niger. I examined the ways in which these government-led, decentralization-related, capacity-building efforts are perceived “on the ground” by conducting semi-structured interviews with key informants in Zermou, a rural Nigerien village where I lived as a Peace Corps volunteer for 17 months.¹ During those interviews, I explored three key criteria critical to effective good governance outcomes: *state capability* to provide services, *accountability* among different education actors and *responsiveness* to the expressed needs and rights of citizens. Having based my interview questions on these three criteria, I then performed a content analysis on the responses received, analyzed different themes that arose and determined how governance and governance issues are observed at the local level.

Located in south-central Niger 65km northeast of the Zinder region’s capital, Damagaram or Zinderville, the town of Zermou is a good example of a Nigerien village. Its population (est. 5,000 inhabitants), system of commerce and agricultural make-up reflect much of rural Niger. Likewise, the community faces many natural and systemic obstacles to development. Considering these challenges, I reflect in this paper on the current conditions and capacity-building strategies at work within Zermou’s local school system in the context of its relationships to the country’s central and regional government and the local population, and then discuss potentially viable options for future improvement. This research asks questions common to challenges confronting many developing countries—how are central government capacity-

¹ I lived in Niger between from July 2009 through January 2011.

building initiatives perceived and translated into action by localities and why are they perceived and translated as such—and may offer insight into analyzing and tailoring educational approaches to local populations.

This paper begins with a brief description of Niger, its background and current conditions. It includes a summary of decentralization and good governance initiatives by the nation's central government, with help from the international community, to develop the capacity of the country's primary and secondary schools. My analysis then reviews relevant literature and explores good governance concepts aimed at increasing the effectiveness of government program implementation as well as aspects of decentralization that align with the goals of those aims. Thereafter, I provide a case analysis of one government-controlled school in Zermou and discuss the results of five interviews with key stakeholders in the community. The paper's final section sketches how this research contributes to our knowledge of the implications of such capacity building efforts in Niger.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geography

Located in northwest Africa, Niger is a landlocked country almost twice the size of Texas. Niger is surrounded by Mali, Algeria and Libya to the north and Burkina Faso, Benin, Nigeria and Chad to its south and east.

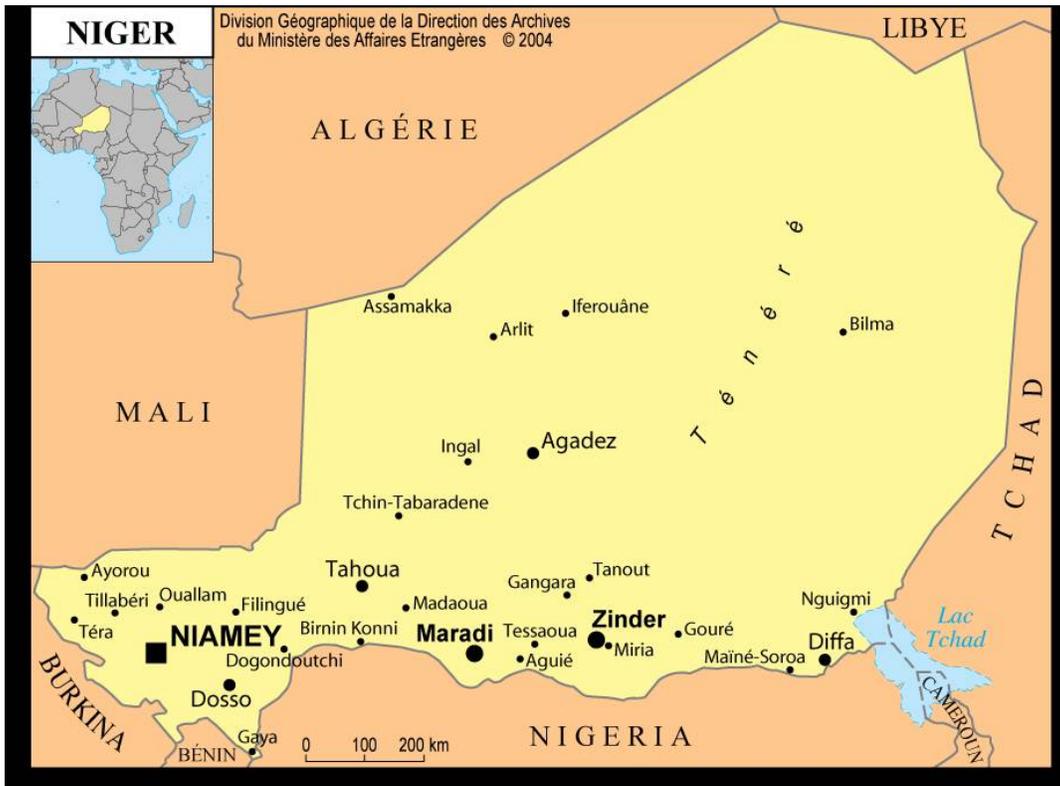


Figure 1 - Niger Map

Source: French Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs, <http://www.diplomatic.gouv.fr/fr/pays-zones-geo/niger/>

According to the CIA Factbook (2012), only 11.43% of Niger was arable in 2005. That acreage is located in the southern-most part of the country. The remainder of the nation is comprised of desert. As such, most of the population lives in the lower third of the country, closer to their Nigerian, Benin and Burkina Faso neighbors.

B. Political Background

Niger has implemented several failed attempts at democracy since its independence in 1960. The former French colony operated almost exclusively under single-party or military rule with centralized governance structures for the first 30 years of its existence. General Ali Saibou came to power during the late 1980s. He encouraged a more open political atmosphere by

releasing political prisoners, liberalizing national laws and policies and eventually consenting to union and student demands for a multi-party democratic system (PeaceCorps-Niger 2007A). In 1991, the country conducted its first legitimate attempt at multi-party elections resulting in a democratic government in 1993. The first few years of democratic governance were chaotic and dysfunctional and were followed by a military coup led by Colonel Ibrahim Bare in 1996. Several key military officers then turned on Bare, assassinating him in 1999, and new democratic elections brought Mamadou Tandja to power.

President Tandja served two five-year terms before attempting to extend his rule through a constitutional amendment. He dissolved the legislature on May 26, 2009 and the judiciary on June 26, 2009, when the two branches of government refused to accept the proposed change. Tandja then gained approval for the measure through a popular referendum on August 4, 2009. Nigerien opposition leaders and many international community leaders also questioned the legitimacy of the referendum and characterized Tandja's actions as an administrative coup d'état. A military coup in February 2010 deposed Tandja and after new elections in April 2011 and under a new constitution that safeguards against similar future incidents, Issoufou Mahamadou became President (CIA 2012). The first half of 2011 also saw new democratically-elected officials with a reestablished national parliament, local and regional government offices.

Concurrent with the democratization process, the Nigerien government has also taken steps to increase its governance capacity so it can address the needs of its citizens more effectively. To date, these initiatives have been undertaken primarily via a decentralization process. Beginning in spring 2002, the central government created regional, sub-regional and local government offices in order to be "closer" and more responsive to citizens' needs. In July 2004, Nigeriens elected approximately 3,700 local government officials to govern their 265 new commune seats, the equivalent of counties in the U.S. (PeaceCorps-Niger 2007A). Two central government ministries—the Ministry for the Interior and Decentralization and the Ministry for Community Development—operate most of Niger's technical assistance programs, including its infrastructure and health and education initiatives, from regional and sub-regional offices (PeaceCorps-Niger 2007).

C. Social, Environmental and Economic Characteristics

As of 2011, Niger ranks 186 out of 187 countries on the UN Human Development Index, indicating a multitude of interconnected, systemic problems in addition to political instability that have inhibited development in the country (UNDP 2011). The World Bank (2012) estimates that 56.5% of Nigeriens lived in poverty in 2007, an improvement from 63% in 1992. Other than certain nomadic groups like the Tuareg and some Fulani families most of Niger’s 17.1 million people live in the lower one-third of the country. Only 17% of the population lived in urban settings in 2010 (CIA 2012). Approximately 90% of the labor force works in agriculture, mostly subsistence farming (CIA 2012).²

Figure 1 shows the primary industries in Niger. Major agricultural products include millet, sorghum, livestock, onions and peanuts. Although analysts say future economic growth

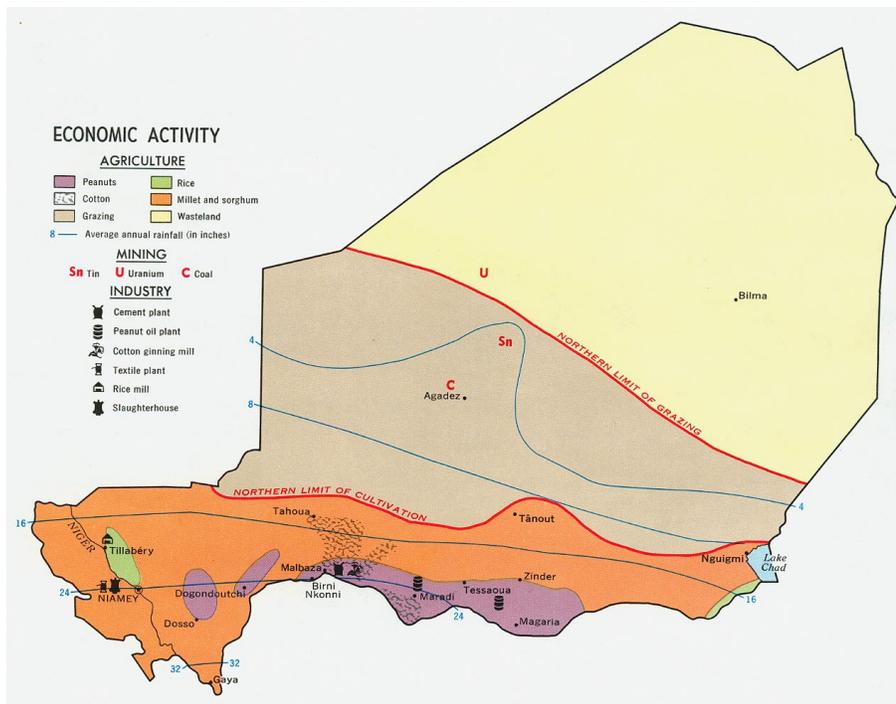


Figure 2 - Economic Activity in Niger

Source: University of Texas Libraries, <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/niger.html> (public domain)

may depend on mining natural resources such as uranium (some of the largest deposits in the world), oil, gold, coal and other mineral resources (CIA 2012), past endeavors have not yet

² Some of this 90% labor force is conducting urban-based agriculture, but most are in rural settings. The seeming contradiction between these two figures—17% population and 10% labor force in urban settings—is may reflect the large number of children residing in urban settings. Many children called “almajiri” go to urban areas to beg. Traditionally they are sent on a spiritual quest for one year to understand Islam better and to live in poverty so they can truly understand what it is to be poor. In addition, with such children and the itinerant population in Niger, conducting a reliable census of the population and labor force would prove difficult.

proven beneficial to development, often due to political and regional instability. Moreover, many of these projects bring in outside help and do not employ the nation's labor force, resulting in little economic impact for most rural Nigeriens who remain in the agricultural sector.

Despite efforts by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Belgian NGO Aquadev, to plant trees to serve as windbreaks and erosion preventatives, the country suffers from continuing desertification, making farming increasingly difficult. Environmental issues that contribute to this ongoing challenge include overgrazing (see Figure 2), soil erosion, deforestation and arguably, global warming (CIA 2012). To add to these difficulties, the country experiences periods of extended drought common to the Sahel region, but increasingly detrimental to Nigeriens' agro-salvo-pastoral production, as rainfall averages decrease (Niger Government 2007).³ The most recent drought in 2009 ended in a widespread famine and a massive international effort to provide relief aid.

It is important to note that while the 2010 famine in Niger resulted mostly from lack of food. In contrast, many experts attributed the country's previous 2005 famine to limited access to available food, i.e. food was present but displaced or too expensive. This argument follows Amartya Sen's entitlement framework, where food may be available, but access to it is limited (Rubin 2009). In 2004, the Sahel countries experienced a small drought that reduced food production by 11%. Niger's neighboring countries did not experience a famine in 2005. In Niger, however, food prices rose too high for most Nigeriens to afford and provide for their basic needs.

The principal cause of the 2005 food crisis in Niger was a lack of government responsiveness. The nation's government was too slow in dispensing its subsidized food (partially an issue of capability), did not provide targeted aid to more vulnerable regions and its offices provided too little food assistance to stabilize food prices (Rubin 2009). Rubin (2009) has argued that the effects of poor government responsiveness were compounded by limited protests from the political opposition or national media—a weakness of Nigerien civil society. International NGOs secured effective action through garnering international attention and aid to the crisis (Rubin 2009). This episode was therefore more a result of a governance failure than limited food availability, an issue that, I argue, also arises in the provision of education in Niger.

³ Rainfall Averages: 445.8 mm (1960s), 423.5 mm (1970s), 354.7 mm (1980s), 300 mm (1990s) (Niger Government 2007)

Food scarcity, poor sanitation⁴ and limited health education contribute to malnutrition and other health concerns including malaria, bacterial and amoebic dysentery, hepatitis A and high infant and maternal mortality rates. Health conditions are slowly improving, however, as illustrated by lower infant mortality rates today as compared to a year ago.⁵ The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) has also recorded this improvement going back to 1989 (UNDP 2011). One result is an even greater population growth rate, 3.63%, third highest in the world, quickened by a fertility rate of 7.52 children/woman, the highest in the world (CIA 2012). This high number exists because traditionally, women aim to have ten children as prescribed by their agrarian and Muslim (80% of the country) traditions. Nigerien women are also more likely to start giving birth during adolescence and have more children during their teen years than women in other countries (UNDP 2011). Thus, approximately two-thirds of the Nigerien population today is 25-years of age or younger (CIA 2012).

Most of these young people have had or are expected to have very little education. The average number of years of schooling that a child of school-entrance age can expect to receive in the coming years, if prevailing patterns of age-specific enrollment rates persist in Niger, is 4.9 years. While this number is higher only for children in Somalia, Sudan and Eritrea (UNDP 2011), it shows improvement from the average years of schooling achieved by current Nigeriens ages 25 years and older—1.7 years—and may help to improve the national literacy rate, which is 28.7%. Broken down, this means 42.9% of males and 15.1% of females are literate (CIA 2010). The disparity in literacy rates between males and females is indicative of the overall high level of gender inequality in the country. With little formal education, youths are expected to have limited economic and social mobility. The international consensus is that more education, particularly for women, can lead to improvements in other macroeconomic indicators, such as health, the economy and political voice (WorldBank 2011). Consequently, one goal of the Nigerien government is to improve access to quality education. As with the nation's response to the 2005 famine, the country's leaders regard improved governance as one component critical to improving this access.

⁴ Among other sanitation issues, only 4% of Niger's rural population has improved sanitation facilities. (CIA 2012)

⁵ Infant mortality is ranked second in the world (behind Angola and Afghanistan) at 109.98 deaths for every 1,000 live births. That number has improved since 2011, when Niger's infant mortality rate ranked third at 112.22 deaths/1,000 births. The maternal mortality rate as of 2008 is 820 deaths/100,000 live births, ranking eleventh among all nations (CIA 2012).

D. Foreign Assistance and Influence

Niger depends on foreign assistance to operate and maintain its government. Because much of that aid is conditional and the nation has sporadically experienced political instability, development assistance has varied greatly and has traditionally been lower than that provided to many of the nation's more stable neighbors, such as Benin (Gazibo 2005). When President Tandja refused to step down from office, for instance, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), with support from the United States and European Union (EU), suspended Niger's membership and imposed trade sanctions on the country. The EU and United Nations also blocked all non-humanitarian aid (Massalatchi 2009). Today, almost half of the national government's budget is derived from foreign donor aid (CIA 2012), leaving it particularly vulnerable to donor fatigue and budget cuts. Niger has also benefited from debt relief, another form of foreign assistance. In 2000, the country elected to enroll in the International Monetary Fund (IMF) program for Highly Indebted Poor Countries (HIPC) and signed an agreement to participate in the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (PRGF). In 2005, the IMF granted Niger 100% multilateral debt relief, which totaled \$111 million or \$86 million when not including the debt assistance provided under HIPC (IMF 2005).

These support programs work in conjunction with several policy reforms designed to aid in the development process. In line with the Millennium Development Challenge and other international initiatives, the Nigerien government created an *Accelerated Development and Poverty Reduction Strategy* in 2002 to serve as "a reference framework for its economic, financial and social policy" (Niger Government 2007). That framework updated the nation's comprehensive development policy in 2007 and used good governance and decentralization of public services as its overall approach to development and poverty reduction as follows:

The institutional, economic and social reforms undertaken by Niger over the past few years have been aimed at promoting good governance. As a result, all development action will now be conducted on the basis of the principles of responsibility and accountability, transparency, respect for the law, combating corruption, and ensuring participation. This innovative approach can only be effective if there is a modernization of the administration and reform of the legal apparatus. In addition, implementing decentralization appears to be a vital aspect of entrenching good governance and regional and local development (Niger Government 2007, p. 105).

The Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS) calls for full participation of all in the design and implementation of public policy as well as capacity building for various stakeholders, including civic education for better citizenship awareness and strengthened local and administrative governance structures. To improve administrative services, the PRS outlines three strategies: 1) redefining the missions and organization of government in line with the adopted deconcentration plan, 2) developing and enhancing the capacities of government bodies, and 3) promoting communication and links with public service users in order to promote the idea of a public administration open to citizens (Ministry of Education 2003, p. 106). At the local level, the PRS expresses a need for greater cooperation between government, local authorities and other grassroots agents particularly in terms of providing more support and empowerment to these local actors through “the gradual, consistent and functional transfer of competences” (Ministry of Education 2003, p. 108).

Another example of aid influence in the development process occurred in 2000 when the World Bank increased funding to the Nigerien government on the condition that the nation allocate half of its education budget to primary schools and implement reforms aimed at providing more access to basic or elementary education. To comply, the central regime increased its teaching staff by hiring large numbers of young graduates at one-third the salary levels of permanent teachers, providing neither benefits nor job security. The policy succeeded in increasing the number of teachers in schools. Because of high unemployment, graduates had few employment opportunities outside the teaching industry. Critics, however, have highlighted the inextricable relationship between quality and access, arguing this strategy could undercut the quality of education by offering little training and incentive to teachers to apply themselves at work (Murphy 2005). Thus, they argue, as access increases, when provided in this fashion at least, quality has greater potential to decrease due to over-extended and poorly used resources. Indeed, the results of this study indicate this may be the case.

E. Civil Society as Development Actor

While primary financial support for Niger comes from international donors, NGOs seek to fill the gaps in government capacity and act as emergency responders during crises. These organizations serve more as policy implementation entities for government and international donors than partners in policy-making, which provides them with a more on-the-ground perspective than international governments and institutions only offering financial assistance and

seeking policy reform. Today, there are also a growing number of domestic NGOs, although the number may still lag behind those of other comparable countries (Davis and Kossomi 2001)⁶. Davis and Kossomi (2001) argue that civil society organizations (not only NGOs, but other local citizens groups, including the media) in Niger need to “gain heft as both a counterweight and a developmental partner to the state” (p. 86).

The Accelerated Development and Poverty Reduction Strategic Plan (Niger Government 2007, p. 65), however, highlights the difficulties that civil society organizations (CSOs) have when working with the state, citing “low capacity, administrative red tape, the concentration of decision-making centres in the capital, non-compliance with the rules of collaboration and poor coordination of support from development partners.” Likewise, in his article discussing the supposed aligned participatory development policy of the World Bank and civil society, Murphy (2005) offered examples of NGOs and other civil society groups that sought to engage the Nigerien office of the World Bank, but were rebuffed. Murphy (2005, p. 369) concluded that, “at the global level the Bank is happy to co-write a social policy script with civil society, but at the hard implementation end, participation is meaningless or nonexistent because the universal, global script has already been written.” Hence, those NGOs and civil society groups that have local implementation knowledge in Niger have very little input on the specific policies they are supposed to help implement.

F. The Education System and Decentralization

As early as independence in 1960, the new government in Niger acknowledged the importance of free public education for all citizens and undertook efforts to achieve that goal. Obstacles to attaining this aim have included few resources, weak governance structures, economic crises (during the 1980s in particular) and differing foreign priorities. Since the 1990s, however, national government and international institution agendas seeking improved education for all have aligned (Korling 2010). Today, Niger is engaged in a decentralization process of its education system, with the support of its international partners, in order to improve quality and access to basic education for all of its children.

The 1998 *Losen*, translated as the law on orientation of the education system in Niger, is the first Nigerien education policy document since independence that outlines a comprehensive

⁶ The 2005 QUIBB (questionnaire using basic indicators of well-being) survey reported there were nearly 600 NGOs and development organizations, 600 associations, 5 trade unions, and more than 5,000 grassroots community organizations operating in Niger (Niger Government 2007). Although without a frame of comparison, these numbers cannot prove or disprove Davis and Kossomi’s assertions.

juridical and legal framework for the nation’s education system. In addition to declaring education a national priority and a right for all citizens, the *Losen* called for, “the decentralization of the management of the education system and the increased implication of local communities, the beneficiaries of education services, in the management and financing of education” (Korling 2010, p. 3). Similarly, the *Programme Décennal de Développement de l’Education* (PDDE), or national education program for 2003-2013, highlighted the need for institutional development of Niger’s education system. The overall goals of the PDDE reform were to provide universal primary education and increase the rate of literacy throughout the country. To accomplish these aims, the PDDE outlined three objectives: 1) to increase access to education services, 2) improve quality of service delivery and 3) support institutional development through improved capacity at the central and regional levels of government as well as increasing the level of responsibility for education delivery on the part of local governance structures. This Program therefore called for a decentralization process that would reorganize and reinforce the capacities of the Ministry of Education on the central and regional administrative levels and that would create local school committees (COGES) to boost community involvement in the education process and in managing schools (Korling 2010). Below is a basic schematic of the education system structure, adapted from the 2003 PDDE document (Figure 3).

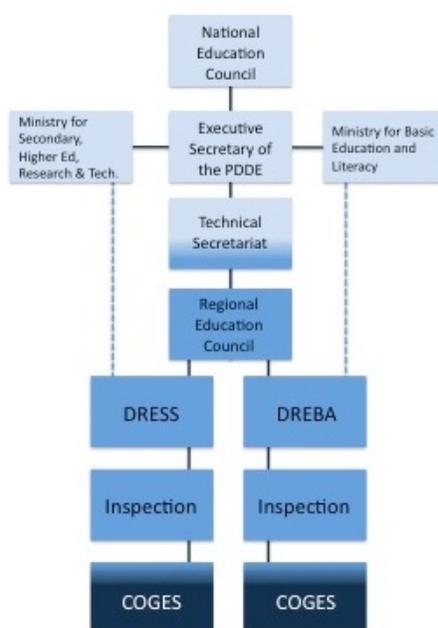


Figure 3 - Education System Organizational Structure

The Nigerien education system remains a very top-heavy governance structure with much of the decision-making power and resources being controlled at the national and regional levels.

The centralized Ministry of Education has several roles including:

- Encouraging communication between teachers and student unions, associations, NGOs and other financial partners,
- Monitoring and evaluation of lower levels of the ministry,
- Identifying national institutional obstacles, reporting results, and organizing round tables for further policy discussion
- Coordinating all program activities on the national level, mobilizing national resources, verifying those resources are transferred to the regional level, joint budgeting with partners, approving annual planning, solving technical problems, periodic evaluations. (Ministry of Education 2003)

Several central ministry departments are responsible for these tasks. The Ministry is then *deconcentrated* to the regional level, meaning the different departments of the national ministry create regional offices and assign ministry officials to delegate and manage work at that level.

The Technical Secretariat is the conduit between the regional and central government offices, ensuring that clear communication between the two occurs and that policies are executed. The supreme governing body at this level of government is the Regional Educational Council, which:

- Evaluates the education procedures in its region;
- Informs and communicates with different education partners in the region;
- Defines and communicates objectives, strategies and results throughout the region;
- Prioritizes tasks and annual program activities;
- Identifies and alleviates institutional obstacles;
- Serves as a mediating body between different education partners when conflict arises. (Ministry of Education 2003)

Administrative offices carry out the tasks and decrees of the Regional Education Council, delegating tasks to sub-regional councils and administrative offices. Specifically, two entities assume these responsibilities: the Ministry for Basic Education and Literacy (DREBA) oversees all primary schools and the Ministry for Secondary, Higher Education, Research and Technology (DRESS), which is in charge of, among other things, junior high schools. These offices are housed in the regional capital, with sub-regional administrative offices, called *Inspections*, located in towns around the provincial center (PeaceCorps-Niger 2010). Financial and material

resources are filtered through the Inspection, which for this case study is located in the town of Guidimouni (See Figure 4 on p. 46).

The Inspections provide technical assistance and support to regionally government-assigned school principals and educators as well as to the *Conseiller Pédagogique* or local school superintendent responsible for teacher training and other tasks related to curriculum. From the description provided in the *Programme Décennal de Développement de l'Éducation* (PDDE), the primary roles of the regional and sub-regional governments are to provide expertise, training, material and financial resources and oversight to local schools and governing structures. For instance, the PDDE describes a funding request process, similar to a grant assistance application, for local authorities who want to conduct teacher training, school information workshops for citizens or other events that would improve local capacity to engage in quality education (Ministry of Education 2003, p. 63-64).

At the village level, decentralization has led to the creation of locally-governed school boards, called *Comité de Gestion des Établissements Scolaires* (COGES), charged with overseeing such tasks as building construction, textbook and other material management, student matriculation and attendance, teacher contracts, health programming and HIV/AIDS education (Ministry of Education 2003; PeaceCorps-Niger 2007A). The COGES, composed of representatives from the school administration, parents and students, is also responsible for:

[T]he management of school funds including state subventions and community funds, [...] to more community oriented tasks such as the promotion of schooling, especially the schooling of girls. In a context of scarce state resources the school committees are also a means of mobilizing local resources and are encouraged to raise resources through parental contributions in money or in kind, contributions from local NGOs, associations, or private benefactors (Korling 2010, p. 4).

The PDDE describes other measures to improve this decentralized system such as clearly dividing functions between national, regional and local offices and increasing the number of in-service teacher trainings to eleven days a year (Ministry of Education 2008).

The 2003-2013 *Programme Décennal de Développement de l'Éducation* (PDDE) also highlights certain governance aspects of the decentralized system. First, the authors several times discussed the idea of making localities responsible for their own school system, often in reference to the COGES. Second, the document uses good governance terminology such as transparency and accountability, mostly within its sections concerned with finance and

budgeting. While there is some discussion of methods to report activities and exchanges of material and goods, most of these operations dealt with increasing transparency of monetary exchanges. Third, the PDDE emphasizes evaluation of the new program and the actions and activities of its key actors. The approach reflects a top-down perspective, however. Each echelon of government monitors and evaluates its subordinate, which one could argue, makes one more accountable to one's superiors than to service beneficiaries. The document also offers few details concerning the evaluation process, except for assigning multiple players to that role. Fourth, in certain instances, particularly those in which the regional government is expected to provide services or materials to the local level, the PDDE references outsourcing to NGOs (Ministry of Education 2003).

In an August 2011 article in a national newspaper, *Le Sahel*, the then newly appointed Minister of Education highlighted the proposed priorities for her tenure. Minister Ali Mariama El Hadj Ibrahim noted the injustice of national government offices with plenty of furniture and other resources and still limited distribution of basic school supplies and equipment for primary school classrooms. She declared her mission was to ensure the flow of new resources to schools throughout Niger through improved organization and coordination among education programs and tiers of government. Ibrahim also said:

I am counting on my team to combat certain hindrances to the objectives that have been assigned to us and that require us to rally all our energy to, among other things, modernize the administration and the operations of this Ministry through new information and communication technologies. These technologies will help us to simplify rules and procedures; support the beneficiaries of our education services: students, citizens, teachers, and civil society groups; and improve our curriculum so that it will adapt to the needs of our country's socio-economic context (my translation) (Gaoh 2011, www.lesahel.org).

The Minister's comments indicate a continued need to improve governance structures among the various scales of government as well as address the most basic educational needs of those on the local level.

The 2008 review of the PDDE conducted by the National Ministry of Education also discussed this need to improve efforts, particularly concerning quality, access and institutional development (Ministry of Education 2008). The Ministry's findings suggested the new PDDE educational reform program had increased access and school enrollment throughout Niger. Between 2000 and 2008, for instance, net school enrollment in the Zinder region, the region of

this case study, more than doubled. According to Niger's National Statistical Institute however, implementation of mechanisms that improve educational quality and efforts to secure decentralized institutional development have thus far been minimal and are necessary in the future if the program is to succeed (INS-NIGER 2010).

III. LITERATURE REVIEW

As the institutional, economic and social reforms undertaken by Niger's government have been aimed at promoting good governance, and because the nation's leaders argue that one of the most effective methods of institutionalizing effective governance in the development process is via decentralization (Niger Government 2007), this section provides an overview of the more recent governance, good governance and decentralization literature. In this part, I discuss the various definitions and components of these theories, some of their critiques and, finally, offer a more contextualized and complex way of viewing governance reform in Niger. I begin by examining the general definitions of governance and then develop a more focused discussion on what constitutes good governance, treat general criticisms of it and explore how decentralization fits into the governance reform literature.

A. What is Governance?

One of the more rudimentary definitions of governance is that of power and authority used to manage a country's economic and social affairs (Director of Management 1997; DFID 2007; Elahi 2009; Kauffman, Kraay et al. 2010). Reflecting on Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Social Contract* (Elahi 2009) leads one to consider governance as not only wielding power and authority to manage a country, but also exercising that power and authority (bestowed on government by citizens) for the good of that nation's citizenry. Rousseau postulated that man lives in a state of nature where he is free to do as he will; however, in order to survive and live among other men, he willingly sacrifices some of his freedom to the "general will," and replaces his "physical impulse and right of appetite with the voice of duty" (Elahi 2009, p. 7). Through this association with others, this new citizenry forms a higher authority (read government) to monitor and maintain the civil and political liberties of all. Moreover, this organization distributes social goods and benefits to the citizenry it serves (Elahi 2009). These initiatives are manifest through public services, including education.

In this case, the government's responsibility to the country's citizens is key. It is those individuals whose consent allows the regime to enjoy authority to govern society. Britain's Department for International Development (DFID) has also argued that, in the larger picture, governance is often about relationships between citizens and the state. This includes all

mechanisms, processes, relationships and institutions “through which citizens and groups articulate their interests and exercise their rights and obligations” (2007, p. 10).

Many definitions of governance emphasize the role of institutions and processes involved in employing authority (Kauffman, Kraay et al. 2010). Today, the World Bank interprets governance as:

[...] the traditions and institutions by which authority in a country is exercised. This includes a) the process by which governments are selected, monitored, and replaced; b) the capacity of the government to effectively formulate and implement sound policies; and c) the respect of citizens and the state for the institutions that govern economic and social interactions among them. (Kauffman, Kraay et al. 2010, p. 6).

This definition of governance refers to the institutional framework and processes involved in wielding authority, which often arise through bureaucracy, contracts, partnerships, negotiations and other relationships. Government is comprised of various institutions developed to oversee a society. In the case of democracies, citizens choose public officials to work within these institutions to create and enforce rules and policies for effectively managing development and resources. While elected officials may change, the institutions in which they work generally endure.

For developing countries, particularly in Africa, many of these organizations are weaker and entangled with neopatrimonial tendencies, or political elites using government resources to gain the loyalty of certain populations. After independence in the 1960s, many African countries were left with remnant institutional shells from colonial governments. The capacity of these institutions to focus political interests and resource support toward a united goal of development was limited (Levy & Kpundeh 2004). The result was a rise in neopatrimonialism:

[T]he mode of governing bureaucracy shifted from the clarification, monitoring, and enforcement of formal rules to informal rules set without transparency, and sometimes increasingly capriciously, by a country’s political leadership. [...] Neopatrimonial rule generally operated by conferring discretionary rents on favored allies, giving little attention to the impact of rentier policies on economic growth, the efficiency of public services, or the quality of business regulation. The classic consequences, evident in country after country, included the disruption of markets, rising costs of doing business, urban bias, and increased protectionism (Levy & Kpundeh 2004, p. 5).

A neopatrimonialist society favors, to an extreme extent, those with connections, who can pay for their status and who can manipulate and control outputs of large market industries. One goal of capacity-building initiatives is to help build strong institutional structures that are less vulnerable to corruption and economic inequality as a result of neopatrimonialism. Reinforcing institutional structures and processes so they are just and open to all populations is one step toward democratic governance. Niger exhibits neopatrimonial tendencies. Thus, when analyzing the governance structures that manage education service distribution in Zermou, taking into account this culture and its weak institutions is important.

DFID addresses governance institutions as well and the UK development agency distinguishes helpfully between institutional and organizational processes in development. According to DFID, organizational development deals with the day-to-day management of resources within a given agency and the capacity to carry out those tasks. Meanwhile, institutional process deals more with the rules, both formal and informal, that govern the management of those resources and the agency(ies) as a whole. Institutional development addresses not only formal networks, such as government policy and oversight, or influences from the for-profit sector and media, but also the informal rules that affect individual and collective behaviors (DFID 2007). Differentiating between these two types of development—organizational and institutional—may help in understanding what approach one should take to improving these structures. Governance involves an intricate networking of actions and processes, all within a long-lived (and also evolving) institutional framework.

Bevir (2010) considers state institutional structures important to governance, but he also argues:

The concept of governance evokes a more pluralistic pattern of rule than does government: governance is less focused on state institutions, and more focused on the processes and interactions that tie the state to civil society (p. 1).

In fact, Bevir argues modern governance discourse, both national and international, arose primarily due to a crisis of faith in the state and a desire to look to other actors to fill roles normally belonging to “the failing state” (Bevir 2010). In Bevir’s view, a “failing state” is a national government that has not met the expectations of its citizens when making decisions for its people and providing public services.

To counterbalance the ineffectiveness of the “failing state,” theorists argue the for-profit sector and civil society must also play critical roles in governance. The for-profit sector, for example, has the power to affect the vitality of local economies and play a part in the development of approaches to improving their efficiency and outcomes. Theoretically, government and for-profit sector collaboration can facilitate growth of local and regional economies and improve the overall wellbeing of a community. Civil society groups are often empowered by group members as well as the broader community to serve as advocates for certain populations and causes, watch dogs against government corruption, service delivery agents and experts on specific topics of importance. All of these activities work within the governance process to bring about changes in how society is governed.

For its part, the UNDP also encourages increased linkages and interactions between the state, the for-profit sector and civil society:

Because each domain of governance—state, private sector, civil society—has strengths and weaknesses, the pursuit of good governance requires greater interaction among the three to define the right balance among them for sustainable people-centered development. Given that change is continuous, the ability for the three domains to continuously interact and adjust must be built-in, thus allowing for long-term stability (Director of Management 1997, p. 8).

Many development agencies, including the UNDP, argue that to strengthen the institutions of governance, the three spheres of society involved in such efforts—the state, the for-profit (market) and civil society sectors—must build collaborative networks and strengthen their linkages (Director of Management 1997).

By creating these cooperative networks among the three spheres of governance, society would not be moving toward a future with diminished capacity, as some would argue, but a state with increased capability to contribute to “redressing asymmetries” caused by market failure, to work with and monitor its partners to ensure the reliability of the collaborative structures and prevent corruption or inefficiencies, and to maintain and bring voice to the public perspective in such endeavors (Donahue and Zeckhauser 2001). Donahue and Zeckhauser (2011) contend that one misconception of transferring public services from the government to other private partners is that government can then “take a back seat.” Sadly, in some countries, this scenario has become the case with populations becoming dependent on the services of international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) because state governments lack the capacity to govern.

Ideally, however, collaborative governance entails that no one “eats for free.” Discretion and responsibility are shared amongst all parties to certain degrees. Moreover, when playing an active role in these projects, government must balance between governance control over public services and complete absence from the social sphere (Donahue and Zeckhauser 2011).

Developing the proper balance of these interactions and partnerships among the state, for-profit sector and civil society has played a large role in recent discussions on good governance theory, described in the next section, particularly when considering service delivery.

Because the Nigerien government still maintains primary control over education service delivery, this research focuses more on state governance structures—the networks among school, local and regional government institutions—than those in the for-profit sector or civil society. I will, however, consider the role these other two sectors play currently and their potential roles in the future when I discuss the results and analysis of stakeholder interviews. Niger’s economy is very limited, with few resources to assist in development initiatives. One of the primary reasons for improving education in the nation is to help boost the for-profit sector by increasing the capacity of Niger’s citizens to attain a measure of economic prosperity on their own.

On the other hand, the country has a growing civil society that is particularly active in urban areas. When the Nigerien central government reduced funds to the national university in favor of channeling additional support toward primary education, a move supported and instigated by international donors, university student groups organized large protests in the country’s capital, Niamey. In rural Niger, civil society is less active, but exists in the form of *fadas* (men’s groups), as well as women’s groups that often assemble with the aid of INGOs. NGOs indirectly help the school system by providing needed supplies and assisting in teacher training. In addition, the most recent decentralization education reform called for community-based school boards, which could potentially influence directly the way in which local educational institutions are governed.

B. What Is Good Governance Theory?

If governance involves many different actors, good governance involves the quality of both the process and the interaction among its players (Abellatif 2003). To determine its relative value, theorists and practitioners of governance have focused on its aims. For the UNDP, human development is the goal, good governance the means, and the state, for-profit sector and civil society are the entities involved that must collaborate to attain human development (Elahi 2009).

As a 1997 UNDP policy paper, *Governance for Sustainable Human Development*, stated, “The goal of governance initiatives should be to develop capacities that are needed to realize development that gives priority to the poor, advances women, sustains the environment and creates needed opportunities for employment and other livelihoods” (Director of Management 1997, p. 3).

The World Bank is one of the leading advocates of good governance policies and has successfully promoted this perspective and its supposed benefits to other development agencies and developing countries, including Niger. According to Kaufmann and the World Bank, much research suggests that countries with improved governance derive a larger “development dividend” than those with weak governance structures (Kaufmann 2005, p. 41). Those countries that evolve from a low level of governance capacity to an average degree have the opportunity to triple their income per capita in the long term. Reduced infant mortality and illiteracy represent other indirect results of good governance policies and their effective implementation (Kauffman 2005).

Definitions of good governance initially developed from liberal faith in representative democracy and the free market economy. Because economic—not political—concerns were within their purview, institutions like the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) narrowly interpreted the theory with respect to institutional and managerial issues of public sector reform, focusing on the efficiency of such processes. In a 1989 report, the World Bank declared that a “crisis of governance” in Sub-Saharan Africa was a key barrier to economic development (World Bank 1989). The calamity to which the Bank pointed primarily referred to overly bureaucratized central governments with inefficient public services. To address these concerns, many development agencies have looked to technical concerns, such as legal frameworks and methods of capacity building, as well as strengthening civil society, “in order to reduce the power of the state, attack corruption, and ensure the efficient allocation of public resources” (Bevir 2010, p. 99). Some of the earliest good governance efforts manifested in privatizing public services and encouraging greater responsiveness to the citizen “client” through increased competition among different groups providing services. The negative side effects of these initiatives, including worsening conditions for poorer populations, resulted in a broader concept among theorists and development agencies of what constitutes good governance.

Today, the criteria for good governance have become more complicated, and a full definition and listing of strategies to attain effective governance outcomes is more elusive than ever. Analysts have offered multiple criteria to gauge progress toward the goal of improved governance, including community participation, transparency, accountability to citizens, resource efficiency and equity, effectiveness, responsiveness, rule of law, control of corruption, political stability and absence of terrorism/violence (Director of Management 1997; Abellatif 2003; DFID 2007; Kauffman, Kraay et al. 2010). As a whole, these concepts deal primarily with the responsibility of governance agents to a country's citizens or to democratic governance principles. The British Department for International Development (DFID) has grouped these characteristics into a three-part typology (DFID 2007):

- **State capability:** the ability and authority of leaders, governments and public organizations to get things done. This may include effectiveness and efficiency.
- **Accountability:** the ability of citizens to hold their leaders, governments and public organizations responsible for their actions. Embedded in this idea are transparency of institutions and citizens' ability to participate in political processes.
- **Responsiveness:** how leaders, governments and public organizations actually behave in responding to the needs and rights of citizens. Citizen participation may aid in increasing responsiveness through improved communication and knowledge of citizens' needs. If these institutions are corrupt, they will not be responsive to the needs of their people (p. 18).

These three criteria for determining good governance outcomes are interconnected and mutually reinforced in the development process. Increasing a state's capability may augment its ability to respond to its citizen's needs. Improving accountability and responsiveness may help to create and strengthen networks among government, for-profit and civil society institutions and result in pooled resources that increase capability. In contrast, when a community significantly improves one of these components, while ignoring the others, uneven or insufficient development may occur. A judicial system's capability could be improved, for instance, but without addressing the system's accountability and responsiveness to local populations, corruption could nonetheless be the paradoxical result of strengthened capabilities.

C. Critiques of Good Governance

1. Modernist and Neoliberal Tendencies

Like any analytical approach or proposed reform, good governance theory has its detractors as it is based primarily on a modernist view of the world that takes a scientific

approach to addressing social problems. Critics of good governance attack this philosophical assumption, highlighting the perspective's broad definition and associated inherently immeasurable characteristics. Many of the attributes defined in good governance theory—accountability, responsiveness and transparency—are difficult to quantify or measure. By attempting to create a scientifically-based system of evaluation for these characteristics, Camilla Stivers (2008) and other governance theorists argue that too much focus on the “correct” end product and not on the process of development results.

Although good governance advocates have broadened the definition and criteria associated with their approach over time, their primary attitude to development is still associated with the promotion of market reforms in the public sector of developing states. Critics contend this bias toward the market economy ignores other valid economic theories such as Keynesian economics or state planning (Bevir 2010) which, in the case of Niger's education system reforms, may be far more relevant than market-based solutions. Furthermore, critics accuse neoliberals of replacing the notion of “citizen” with that of consumer. Bevir (2010) states:

[T]his underlying assumption, and so the reforms themselves, represents a denial of citizenship. In their view [the critics], the reduction of the public interest to a mere aggregation of individual interests leaves no theoretical space for the public and social nature of our common life. It neglects democratic values, public spirit, and civic discourse (p. 102).

The marketization of the public service sector thus diminishes the role of citizens in government by treating them as individuals with specific interests, creating a one-way delivery service, rather than encouraging collaboration between citizens and government to discover shared aspirations and common purposes.

2. Superficial Reform

Despite these concerns, international donors have often used the attainment of good governance criteria benchmarks as a prerequisite to provision of development aid. One result of this reality is a learned reluctance on the part of developing nations' governments to pursue in-depth institutional reforms and instead seek to demonstrate rapid results to foreign donors. Pressure from funders has induced these governments and development agents often not to seek sustained contextualized capacity improvements to governance because they result only from a slow, time-consuming process that does not create immediate, “definable” results (David Booth and Fritz 2008). Public services tend particularly to suffer from such initiatives because they

require long-term, in-depth attention and it is difficult to maintain public and international officials' interest and resolve for long periods (Bardhan 2002). In order to maintain donor funding and international attention, many reform initiatives therefore exaggerate short-term results, but may not, or cannot, follow-through long-term.

Levy & Kpundeh (2004) also refer to the complexity of implementing these reforms, discussing politicians' dilemma as a particular hindrance to policy implementation in African countries:

[...] the need to balance the technocratic logic that shaped many proposals for reform against the political imperatives of building and sustaining alliances with powerful patrons, of avoiding conflict with powerful social groups, and of maintaining electoral support. Depending on the severity of the political constraints, even well-intentioned leaders are thus limited in how ambitious a reform agenda they can adopt (p. 17).

The criteria and prerequisites to receive aid seem logical in theory. The process of implementing these reforms, however, is often more complicated than policy makers imagine, so much so that practitioners find completely addressing these wide-ranging reforms beyond their abilities. This frequent scenario has led to governments creating superficial changes that tackle the minimum requirements of international donors, but often do not genuinely result in the institutionalization of good governance principles (Nanda 2006).

This discussion suggests that good governance philosophy, as defined by specific external entities, is often imposed on targeted nations rather than being generated from within them. Developing state governments acquiesce to outside demands in order to receive international funding, even if the results of such efforts result in little sustained improvement for the larger state population, particularly for those most in need of aid. This seems to be the case in Niger as well. Its government was slower in initiating good governance reforms and as a result received fewer development aid dollars in the 1990s than many of its more proactive neighbors, including Benin (Gazibo 2005). Today, the country's politicians, including its minister of education, tout good governance principles, although it is questionable whether those doctrines are manifest in a thoroughgoing way in the nation's governance actions.

3. The Need for Bottom-up Reform

In 2005, many donor states and institutions signed the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which acknowledged the growing view that effective aid must align with the recipient countries' policies and systems. The accord encouraged donors to refrain from the long-

practiced method of financial leveraging and instead focus on becoming more engaged in institution building, technical assistance and policy dialogue with countries' governments (David, Booth and Fritz 2008). These types of efforts illustrate a changing mentality, from focusing on good governance criteria, which highlight the end results of development, to a more contextualized, procedural approach to advancement with desired good governance outcomes envisaged in the years to come.

An early UNDP article presaged this stance by contending that the focus of development interventions should be less on immediately initiating good governance principles and more on establishing dialogue among citizens on the meaning of the concept and their specific needs (Director of Management 1997). The Development Programme has offered several contextual characteristics that may come into play in the design of good governance programs:

- Socio-economic indicators including education, access to basic needs, and the role of women.
- The economy: its base, growth and type; financial dependence on external resources, including aid and debt; and degree of integration with the global economy.
- Human capacities and sustainability. Natural resource base and trends in the environment.
- Cultural, religious and ethnic diversity and structures, conflict or polarization and internal means of resolving conflict.
- Indigenous values, networks and knowledge (p. 15).

These different societal traits are particularly important when considering program implementation on the local level. Many theorists emphasize that to ensure that good governance principles are truly implemented, such premises must be supported by local populations in addition to engagement by development agents that is based on deeper understanding of local conditions (Nanda 2006; David, Booth and Fritz 2008). Additionally, those espousing good governance tenets should embrace grassroots and participatory development for the sake of discourse and creating shared meaning within a community, rather than around purely instrumental or short-term purposes (Stivers 2008).

4. From Comprehensive to Step-by-Step Reform

Since good governance theory is so comprehensive, its large-scale implementation can be difficult, due to lack of resources and institutional capacity. To address this difficulty, Grindle (2007) has offered a guiding concept of "good enough governance," which posits that political deficits cannot be tackled all at once. Indeed, most of the institutional and capacity-building

efforts to address governance require long-term processes and engagement. As such, this construct highlights efforts to address current or “doable” governance needs, determined by environmental context. Grindle (2007), for instance, suggests the importance of understanding local context including assets and limited resources (e.g. money, time, knowledge and human and organizational capacity) when determining the best ways to move towards better governance. In Niger, a country with inadequate natural resources, human and institutional capacity, this approach to good governance appears especially appropriate.

To develop a more strategic approach to improved governance, Grindle suggests asset-based development strategies, maintaining that practitioners must assess the foundation of existing capacity in the community by asking, “What is there to build on” (Grindle 2007). This “low hanging fruit” could be the stepping off point to increased development. Another process that could prove useful is breaking down the specific interventions often used to address a certain good governance policy and then rating the difficulty of those steps, based on the basic components required of each. Grindle (2007a) also has argued that some public services, such as the provision of on-going education, “require major behavioural changes and high levels of organizational capacity to administer and improve over time” (p. 168).

D. Decentralization and Good Governance

1. Types of Decentralization

Different methods of decentralization exist, many with the intent to weaken central government to secure increased privatization or local autonomy. Many interpret decentralization in three different ways: deconcentration, delegation or devolution (Grindle 2007a). Decentralization might consist simply of creating a network of regional or local offices of specific central government ministries—i.e., deconcentration. In delegation, local and regional governments are assigned specific procedural tasks. Devolution ascribes full authority to local governments to manage and oversee certain services. Although these approaches define the way in which the levels of government interact and how programs and resources are managed, most local public institutions and citizens experience each type of decentralization at the same time. For example:

[...] a local government may be coping with a devolved education system that continues to vest authority over standards and testing in a national ministry; a deconcentrated health system that requires local governments to be responsible only for the maintenance of

local clinics; the full delegation of property tax collection; and the devolution of responsibility over sanitation within norms set by national or provincial governments (Grindle 2007a, p. 118).

Because their goal is greater citizen involvement in political decision-making, decentralization movements driven by good governance principles usually call for devolving public power to local-level, small scale entities (Bardhan 2002). In the case of education sector reform, decentralization generally means devolving responsibility for education to regional and local governments while maintaining national standards (Levy & Kpundeh 2004). This approach seems to be the case for Niger's education system, although the regional government is still highly reliant on the central government for decision-making. The relationship is more of a delegated dynamic than a devolved one.

2. Potential Benefits of Decentralization

Advocates contend decentralization is important to good governance because it brings governments geographically closer to communities and local civic organizations, and thus encourages more interaction among stakeholders, as well as greater accountability and responsiveness to local residents. Municipal governments, by nature of their proximity to their constituencies, potentially have an informational advantage compared to central governments or international groups in the depth and nuance of their understanding of the local context of development. Proponents of decentralization suggest that local governments are likely to be more motivated to use that information to address community needs because they and their actions are more transparent and accountable to their constituencies than central governments that rule from a distance (Bardhan 2002). In addition, Levy & Kpundeh (2004) argue that decentralization creates a stronger democratic framework with numerous checks-and-balances on different levels of government. Results of this governance structure, they say, are more efficient and effective in their allocation of public resources while also restrained in undertaking arbitrary action by political leadership.

3. The Shifting View of the Expert

Advocates of decentralization implicitly assert a changing view of the "expert" in the governance process. Stivers (2008) illustrates the dominant view of traditional governance as looking at the world through a rational, modernist lens, in which problems can be objectively analyzed by experts and corrected using universal principles and policies, and in which

government serves as an instrumental tool that manages service delivery and provides security to its people. In this view, advanced technology and the bureaucratic instrumentality of modern society requires that we rely on *experts* who know the “right” way to handle a problem and operate the system. As a result, citizens do not need to play a role in government except to elect an “expert” to make the choices for them. Ideally, decentralization efforts shift the view of the specialist from that of an unbiased, independent agent to one, who is immersed in local knowledge, acknowledges expertise of others within the community and encourages the involvement of many community members. Particularly in developing countries, experts placed in local leadership roles that utilize their specific capabilities well can also play a pivotal role by increasing the capacity of local governments to solve their own problems instead of relying on higher levels of government to deliver expertise when needed (Grindle 2007a).

E. Critiques of Decentralization

1. Elite Cooptation

Although local government representatives may be considered more expert on local community needs than their regional and central government counterparts, the view that local government is more accountable and responsive to its citizens because it is local is arguable. Even in more developed countries, local governments are often coopted by elites eager to press their own agendas. Their efforts therefore indirectly suppress or undermine democratic social structures (Ehrenberg 1999). In developing nations, cooptation has resulted in insidious corruption at all levels of governments. International development specialists offer another criticism of current decentralization reforms by questioning the relative capacity of localities in many developing nations to shoulder governance responsibilities effectively. In such cases, local government officials may understand the needs of their communities, but they may not necessarily act on those requirements, either due to corruption or lack of ability.

In addition, some theorists warn against a lack of an informed and empowered citizenry to participate in governance. Still others point to weak local democracy and accountability mechanisms. Both criticisms may lead to the enfeebling or cooptation of local governments by elites or by corruption (Bardhan 2002). For its part, DFID has contended several conditions must be met to prevent corruption in local spheres (both government and civil society organizations): “There is growing evidence that when decentralization is combined with greater citizen voice,

effective participatory processes and committed local leadership, change for the benefit of poor people is more likely to happen” (2007, p. 42).

2. Role of Central Government

Many of these critiques could be addressed by strong programmatic support from central governments (assuming they possessed such capabilities), aimed at building the administrative capacity and accountability mechanisms necessary for regional and municipal governments to accept governance responsibilities, i.e., rather than just handing authority over to them (DFID 2007). Moreover, national governments should enforce good governance principles by setting criteria for reform and offering incentives (with careful monitoring to avoid abuse), but let local governments achieve that change through their own means. Several studies of service delivery reform have shown that strong central government action of this sort has yielded successful results; the same appears to be true for such leadership and programs when these are possible at the local level (Polidano 2001).

3. Role of Community Leadership

When approaching governance praxis, Grindle (2007a) has emphasized the role of the leader in implementing decentralization and good governance reforms. In Mexico, these “state entrepreneurs” have the ability to shape the actions of government for at least the years they are in office. Charles Polidano (2001) agrees that governance reform and improved service delivery cannot succeed without the support and active participation of strong government leaders. Theorists dealing with different aspects of governance including David Vogel (2006), Elizabeth Boris and Eugene Steuerle (1999), as well as Donahue and Zeckhauser (2011) have discussed the pivotal role of leadership in institutional reform and success. In the case of decentralized government in Mexico, Grindle (2007a) explains that leaders offer vital skills that help create strong networks and good relationships in order to unlock and bring resources from other levels of government and society. She found that most municipal reforms dealing with public sector modernization had little or no effect on governance unless local leaders, municipal mayors in particular, actively implemented those initiatives. Local officials had the power to initiate public policy and appoint those who could implement it. Even then, the sustainability of those modernization efforts was questionable once government changed leadership.

4. Need for Public Space

The creation of more accessible interfaces with government is also very important to encouraging increased and more diverse citizen participation. After studying decentralization reform in Malawi and Senegal, Ndegwa and Levy (Levy & Kpundeh 2004) suggest first, that policy implementation should sometimes focus less on the technical details and more on coalition building to prompt more action instead of analysis of the development problems. Second, they advocate more heterodox, “institutionally messy” initiatives in order to encourage greater citizen participation. Baiocchi (2003), for instance, finds benefits to open citizen forums that some would argue lead to angry, emotional outbursts, ideological polarization or “exacerbated power differentials” (Thompson 2008). Baiocchi (2003) observes that this chaos may be sometimes inherent to this form of citizen engagement and that it is part of the democratic governance process. Under these circumstances, however, Baiocchi highlights the importance of the state in offering public space for debate and the role of the expert in mediating arguments and other behaviors that would alienate different participants. Bevir (2010) would agree these activities have the potential to reposition citizens successfully in the political sphere and may address issues of declining political trust in the state system. With increased participation, support and confidence of citizens in state government, good governance principles such as state capacity, accountability and responsiveness could be manifest in a real way.

F. Conclusion

Since the 1990s, Niger has undergone several iterations of democratic governance and decentralization reform that have utilized good governance criteria as roadmaps and yardsticks for success. These initiatives have addressed many different public service sectors including education. Before analyzing one particular example of reformed governance structures in that country, education in the rural village of Zermou, this section reviewed the relevant literature on the broader governance issues involved. It examined the definitions and critiques of democratic governance, good governance and decentralization. In doing so, the literature review also revealed many complexities involved in governance-related reforms.

Good governance and decentralization reform initiatives have the potential to build capacities of government. However, their success is highly contingent on many inter-related, complex factors. When discussing decentralized public service reform in Ghana, Tanzania and Zambia, Stevens and Teggemann (2004) frame the process using a play analogy:

Where the combination of stage, actors, and props define the quality of its ensemble: The political and economic context provides the *stage* on which reforms are conceived and implemented. The *actors* involved in the reform process as well as the implementation arrangements shape critically the depth at which change affects existing institutional layers and at what speed. Questions to be asked include if leadership and commitment are sufficient, where leadership is situated and if it has sufficient authority; and how this configuration translates into project structures. Project implementation needs to be carried out by well-qualified staff who are embedded in existing institutional structures or at a minimum have strong links into the political realm. These first two factors—the stage and the actors—must be favorably aligned for the program components to take hold and unleash impact. But the kinds of *props* the actors employ in the battle (the right reforms), their quality and fit (are reforms components technically sound and fit the ensemble of reforms and country context?) as well as the timing of when to bring the props on stage (are the basics in place before more sophisticated reforms are started?) are equally important. (p. 49)

This analogy sums up much of what has been presented in this literature analysis. Successful political reforms based on decentralization and good governance require thought and attention to the stage (the context), the actors (different institutional players from the state, for-profit sector and civil society) and the props (the reform policies used to bring about greater governance capacity—how and when they are implemented). To deepen this complexity, Grindle (2007a) urges international development actors not to see good governance as a simple “...function of the structure of intergovernmental relationships. It is, rather, the consequence of new opportunities and resources, the impact of leadership motivation and choices, the influence of civic history, and the effect of institutions that constrain and facilitate innovation” (Grindle 2007a, p. 3). Understanding these complexities and taking them into account is a significant step in analyzing the approaches to reform and results of reformed governance structures.

IV. METHODOLOGY

Examining the complexities discussed in the literature review through a single case study in Niger means first investigating the decentralization reforms implemented to produce good governance outcomes. I used the DFID three-part typology of good governance to examine Niger's national decentralization process: state capacity, accountability and responsiveness. Through interviews with local stakeholders, I determined how well these criteria have been realized in their perception in the local schools' governance structure. In doing so, I investigated the roles of the players involved in both horizontal and vertical governance structures—school officials, local government, civil society, regional government—and how well these networks function in terms of encouraging local ownership of the reforms, overcoming neopatrimonial tendencies, ensuring effective leadership, securing expert involvement and encouraging participation by local citizens. Finally, I employed Grindle's approach to governance reform, "good enough governance" (2007), to identify practical approaches to improve Zermou's school system.

I selected the town of Zermou as the site for this research because I spent the majority of my time as a Peace Corps volunteer in this Nigerien community and my familiarity with the town helped me examine educational capacity-building efforts there. A case study is appropriate because this analytic approach allows the investigator to delve into specific circumstances and to develop rich or "thick" descriptions of phenomena under study. Case analysis is well suited to understanding the complexities involved in decentralization and good governance initiatives, as they are manifest (or not revealed) through intricate relationships among multiple governing bodies and local citizenry. More generally, as noted above, the community serves as a good example of a rural municipality in Niger, as it exhibits many of the environmental, social and political strains visible in most of the nation's villages. Zermou is especially relevant because it is located in an area that suffers from water shortages and low agrarian yield, due in part to desertification, which is an increasing concern throughout Niger. Considering these constraints is important to determining the capacity of local players to act and participate in reform. Zermou is also the governing seat (county equivalent), meaning it hosts the municipal office and other organizations that oversee and govern the entire commune. The community contains two primary schools, one junior high school (the only junior high in the commune), and a school board

(COGES). This study specifically examined one of Zermou's two primary schools, in which the majority of students matriculate.

I employed DFID's typology of good governance criteria (state capability, accountability and responsiveness) to guide my analysis as it could easily be applied to both the state generally, and the education service sector, particularly. Because decentralization is also an important component of Niger's capacity-building efforts, I also incorporated into my analysis some of the central premises of such efforts, particularly those factors related to citizen participation. As a result, I developed a two-tiered analytical approach. One level examined perceived roles and relationships as they pertained to improved governance capacity among regional government-assigned staff (local schools), the school board, and regional/sub-regional government officials. The second tier of analysis explored the ties between Zermou's primary school and the local community: municipal government, local citizens and citizen groups. Thus, I analyzed both the vertical and horizontal governance structures involved in providing education services in Zermou. This approach helped to determine if, how and where good governance principles espoused by central government capacity-building initiatives were manifest. I created a set of questions to guide my analysis based on my review of relevant literature:

State capability

- What support is the central government supposed to provide according to policy/law documents and what assistance does it offer to the local government and the school system in terms of financing, materials, teachers and teaching resources? Is there a difference between formal requirements and actual state backing and if so, why does this difference exist?
- How does the central government prepare and support local educational system staff, including school superintendents, principals and teachers?
- What are the official roles of Zermou's citizens in supporting local community schools? In reality, how and how well do you think local citizens back local schools?
- What are the official roles of Zermou's municipal office in supporting local community schools? In reality, how and how well do you think the municipality supports local schools?

Accountability

- How is Zermou's school system monitored and held accountable by overseeing central government officials?
- How do Zermou's citizens monitor and survey Zermou school curricula and educational effectiveness?
- What are the principal lines of accountability between the school system and the municipal government?

Responsiveness

- How do the chains of communication operate between the central government and the local school system? How responsive are national government representatives to the demands /goals of those running the local school system?
- How do the chains of communication operate within and between the school system, the municipality and the local population? How responsive are these groups to each other's concerns?

To address these guiding questions, I examined documents, including:

- Nigerien policy documents (*Losen*, *PDDE* program document and updated reviews of program);
- Peace Corps Training Manuals for Education and Community/Municipal Development volunteers, which detail Niger's policies and governance institutions;
- Reports from the World Bank and the African Development Fund Bank that review the education program;
- Articles from national newspapers (*Le Sahel* and *La Griffé*), in which central government officials discuss their goals concerning good governance, decentralization and education.

These documents describe the intended structure of governance in Niger and the laws and policies currently in effect. They also provide a general sense of the reality of primary education-related implementation of capacity-building efforts to date.

In addition to analyzing documents, I conducted semi-structured interviews with selected government officials and village residents based on questions I developed from my review of the literature. I recorded all interviews using Skype© and Skype's Call Recorder© application and transcribed them in the native languages in which they occurred—French and Hausa. I then translated those efforts into English. I interviewed five key local informants in Zermou, representatives of different local institutional governing structures who have specific knowledge of the governance capacity-building initiatives being analyzed:

- One municipal official
- The principal of the primary school (grades 1-5);
- Two teachers from the school: one man with multiple years of experience and one woman who is relatively new to teaching, thereby obtaining two very different perspectives on the local primary school; and
- One board member of the Comité de Gestion des Etablissements Scolaires (COGES), who is also the principal of the other primary school in Zermou.

All of these subjects knew me already or knew of me from my residence in the community. Zermou's mayor assisted in initiating contact with each interview subject, relaying my intentions to interview them on the subject of local school governance and gaining their consent to

participate. Once I received preliminary agreement to participate and the subjects' phone numbers from Zermou's mayor, I called the individuals using Skype ©, discussed my study with them and read the consent form to each to ensure their understanding and willingness to participate in the study. I explained that I would keep their identities confidential as stated in the IRB protocol. Each subject was happy to participate without hesitation, and none was reticent about revealing their identity. One interviewee specifically said to use his name. Nevertheless, I have sought here to ensure the confidentiality of each participant.

In some cases, after reading each the consent form, I set a time to conduct an interview with the subject. In other cases, individuals wanted to do the interview immediately. Four of the conversations lasted between 45 minutes and 90 minutes, with a couple of follow-up consultations in later weeks. The shortest interview, 20 minutes, was curtailed because the individual had to return to work, although the interviewee had addressed all but two questions in the time available. I did break my queries up to make them more comprehensible to interviewees. I also sometimes moved between questions depending on the direction of the conversation and whether the individual had essentially answered the request during their previous response. I asked follow-up questions as needed. In some instances, respondents did not mention certain groups' involvement in the education government system (e.g., the COGES), in which case I did prompt them to discuss those concerns. In addition, after asking my questions, I also presented potential improvements to the system, asking why they would or would not work.

My original plan for this study was to interview 11 actors from two different educational institutions: one primary school and the local junior high school. Due to logistical, technological and personal issues on the part of potential interviewees, however, I limited the study to one elementary school and questioned a smaller group of people. Nevertheless, the actors represented play a central part in Zermou's school system. Because the town is relatively small and its education community so close-knit, many of the responses given in the interviews also reflected on the other educational institutions in Zermou, including the junior high school. Furthermore, some interviewees also had overlapping positions or had previously held other posts within the governance structure that I studied. The board member of the COGES, for instance, is also the principal of the other primary school in Zermou. The municipal official was the school superintendent prior to being elected. Consequently, these interview subjects were well

positioned to offer different perspectives on the same set of concerns. Table 1 below describes how these sources map against this study’s proposed analytical criteria and questions.

After compiling all documents and interviews, I initially coded them into themes according to the DFID good governance typology: state capacity, accountability and responsiveness and then subdivided those groupings further, based on whether the responses pertained to central-local relations or local-local relations (separating community and municipality). I refined my findings further to reveal views on current conditions and how to improve them as well as to identify principal obstacles to change or for improvements in existing conditions. I created a category for each potentially relevant comment from my interviews for each theme and, once that process was complete, aggregated those findings into the fewest analytically distinct concerns I could for each major theme (by interview initially and then across conversations) without distorting my findings.

Table 1 - Analytical Table of Documents and Interviews in Relation to Good Governance Responsiveness

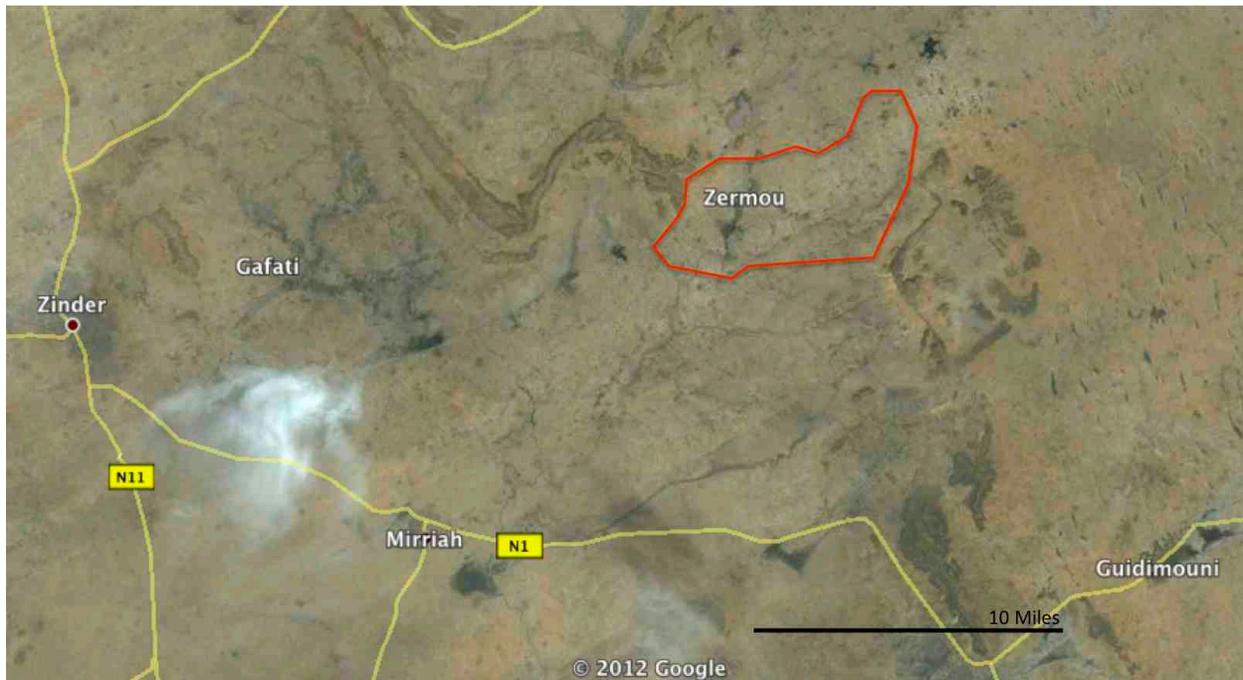
		State Capacity	Material Support of Schools	Staff Preparation and Support	Local Support	Accountability	Central Government Monitoring	Local Citizen Engagement	Local Municipal Office	Responsiveness	Central-Local Communication	School-Local Communication	School-Municipal Communication
POLICIES AND OBLIGATIONS	PDDE Program Document on 2003-2012 Education Development Plan	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
	PDDE Program Review Documents (3): Access, Quality, Institutional Capacity 2008-2010	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X	X	X	
	2008 Poverty Reduction Strategy	X		X		X	X			X	X		
	World Bank - Project Report 2011	X	X	X		X	X						
	African Development Fund- Project Completion Report 2009	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X		
	Peace Corps Education Manual	X	X	X	X	X		X		X		X	
	Peace Corps Community Development Manual	X			X	X	X		X	X	X		X
	News Articles from <i>Le Sahel</i> and <i>La Griffe</i>	X				X				X			
POLICIES AND PERCEPTIONS	The Mayor of Zermou	X	X		X	X			X	X			X
	Primary School Principal	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
	Teachers (2)	X		X		X		X		X		X	
	COGES General Secretary/Acting President	X			X	X		X	X	X		X	X

The recurring themes helped reveal the priorities of central government and other development agencies concerning good governance, and local actors’ perceptions and ranking of such issues in their local school system. Furthermore, these concerns show how decentralization strategies and steps aided or hindered local politics and concerns. Using Grindle’s “good enough governance” argument as a guide, I then reflected on the current conditions in Zermou, as seen

through the eyes of local villagers, and what reasonable actions, in light of existing resource constraints, could be taken to improve the effectiveness of the school system to serve its students.

V. RESULTS

Zermou is located in the Zinder region of Niger, which is the fifth furthest province from the national capital as you drive along the national road heading east (See Figure 1). Zermou is approximately 65km (40mi) northeast of Zinder region's capital, Zinder (also known as Zinderville and Damagaram). The regional offices of the Ministry of Education are located in Zinderville, while Zermou's sub-regional Inspection is located in the town of Guidimouni, southeast of Zermou. To travel between Zinderville and Zermou, one takes the Gafati road, a primarily deep sand road through agricultural fields. Travel between Guidimouni and Zermou consists of taking the main national road between Guidimouni and Mirriah and then traveling north on another deep sand road to Zermou.



Source: Google Earth

Figure 4 - Regional Map of Zermou (Commune boundary in red)

Figure 4 shows the Zermou commune boundary in red. The commune, similar to a county in the U.S., is composed of several dozen villages and contains 32 elementary schools. With a population of around 6,000 people, Zermou is one of the larger villages in the commune. It is also the government seat, and, as such, it contains the municipal offices that govern the entire jurisdiction. The municipal office serves as the direct link with regional (Zinderville) and sub-regional (Mirriah) government offices. Zermou also has a traditional chief, the village Sarki, who plays a role in tax collection and judicial governance. Zermou is a cultural and service center for

the area. It has the only junior high school in the commune, the jurisdiction's health center with 4-6 regular staff members and medical equipment (as opposed to 1-2 staff member health huts with limited supplies normally found in very rural areas), a community radio station and a major market on Fridays that most residents in the area visit regularly.

To provide a better understanding of the local education system's governance network before presenting the results of the interviews and document analyses, Figure 6 illustrates the key institutional actors that I will discuss. It is based on descriptions in policy texts and on information provided by interview subjects concerning formal and informal relations among these different stakeholders. The policy documents (shown in Figure 4), for example, discuss the roles of the central and regional government, and at times, how those responsibilities relate to local entities. As such, solid lines emanate mostly from the regional government and the recent government-created entity, the COGES. The dashed lines, however, represent more informal relationships not defined within the official education system, but that exist at the grassroots level.

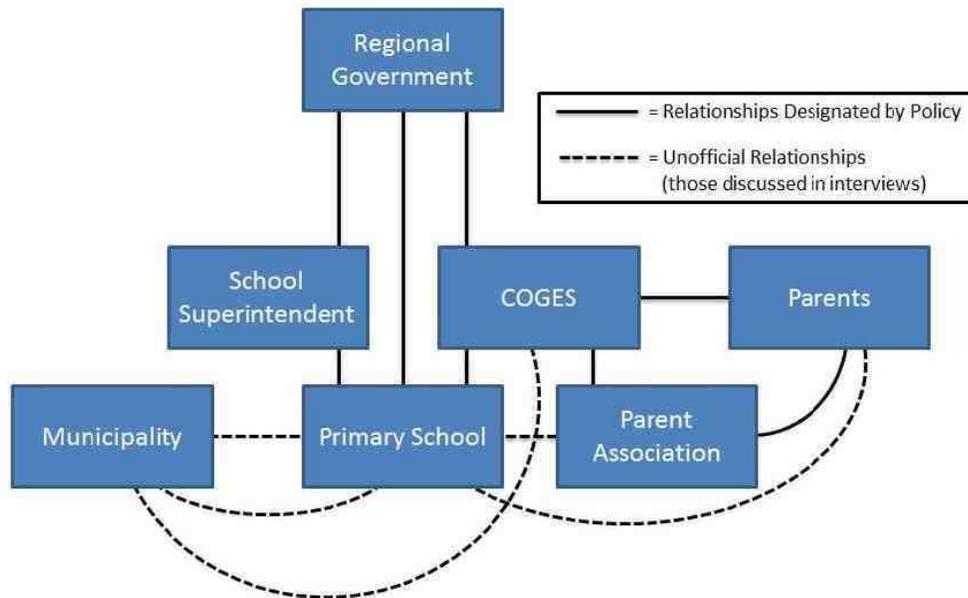


Figure 5 - Zermou Local Education Governance Network

The primary school under analysis has one principal, one unofficial assistant who helps with administrative work, and five different classes comprising grades one through five. According to interviews, however, the school only has four teachers including the principal and

assistant. The village has one school superintendent, called the *Conseiller Pédagogique* or *Chef Secteur*. The superintendent serves all 32 schools in the commune, not just the three institutions in the village. Likewise, the COGES in Zermou is not only concerned with the village's schools, but all the other schools within the commune. Some of these other entities in the jurisdiction have parent and teacher associations in their own villages whose representatives come together to form the larger, regional COGES in Zermou village. Although the committee is a central and regional government-created entity, I will treat it as a local organization in my analysis, rather than as a direct arm of the central and regional government. The COGES is comprised entirely of local individuals, is meant to act like a locally-driven support system for the school, and, like the educational system, it often waits for resources from the central and regional branches of government. As designed and envisioned the COGES should also have direct links to parents and parent associations. The parent association in Zermou, however, is no longer active.

A. State Capacity

DFID defines state capacity as, “the ability and authority of leaders, governments and public organizations to get things done” (2007, p. 18). Accompanying this idea are the efficiency and effectiveness in determining how well leaders, governments and public organizations accomplish collective aims. During interviews, I explained that I wished to understand the official roles and responsibilities of different governing bodies involved in supporting Zermou's local schools to educate the community's children. I also wanted to know how well each interview subject believed these institutions were fulfilling those roles and why they adopted that viewpoint. When discussing the capacity of each institutional actor, respondents often distinguished between each individual's sense of authority, their right/power to act in a specific way and their actual ability to carry out tasks. When individuals discussed authority or lack of authority, they seemed implicitly to equate that with the responsibility to support the “democratic governance” ideology described in the literature review. Thus, while authority and responsibility are distinct issues in the minds of some respondents, they are also closely and inextricably linked. The following sections provide a summary of the responses provided to the interview question dealing with state capacity.

What support is the central government supposed to provide according to policy/law documents and what support does it provide to the local government and the school system in terms of financing, materials, teachers and teaching resources? Is there a difference between formal requirements and actual state assistance and if so, why does it seem to exist?

Four of five interviewees directly expressed the significant role the central and regional government *is supposed to* play in education service provision. All respondents agreed these higher tiers of government should provide material, financial and personnel resources to local schools. Subject E added monitoring of schools and moral support from the central and regional governments. Subject B referenced the responsibility of the central government to provide "free quality education," the same message transmitted in media texts and by the Minister of Education (Gaoh 2011; Sirandji 2012). Subject A contended that, "the mentality, or better, the general knowledge of our students has really been left completely to the will of government (indicating central government)" (personal interview, March 2, 2012). While other interviewees did not explicitly express this sentiment, it was clear by the end of each interview that each believed the central and regional government has the ultimate authority and, for the most part, ability to provide educational services and all the materials and resources required of that service.

In the view of interview subjects and some project review documents, the central and regional government does not exercise its authority and ability to provide services. The PDDE program review documents (2007; 2007a; 2007b), the Poverty Reduction Strategy (PRS 2008) and the African Development Fund Project Completion Report (2009) each point to a lack of ability on the part of central and regional government, positing the "weak capacity of institutional players charged with operating the system" (PDDE Institutional Development 2007), which results in a dysfunctional governance system. The PRS (2008) highlights inadequate infrastructure, services and staff. For instance, one crude measure, the civil servant to constituent ratio, is much lower in Niger than in other countries in the northwest African region. Niger has one employee for every 223 inhabitants; Mali has a ratio of 1:158 and Cote d'Ivoire provides 1:102 (PRS 2008). The African Development Fund (2009) suggests the state needs to allocate a more substantial share of its budget to the regional and local communities while reinforcing their capacity to maintain current infrastructure, resources and supplies. In its 2011 review of the current education reform plan and its results, the World Bank praised the government's progress, as most target indicators had been reached or were on track. The

Nigerien government, however, had yet to address the two intermediate measures addressing school supplies for teachers and students: textbooks acquired and distributed (0 out of 412,260) and student booklets acquired and distributed (0 out of 546,000) (World Bank 2011).

Interview subjects in Zermou all described receiving little or no support from the central and regional government. They each considered those levels of governance to have the authority and responsibility to provide education services, but they did not see the upper echelons of those institutions, at least, exercising that influence. Four of five interviewees' primary explanations for such a failure in government were corruption and politics. It was only much later that one interviewee expressed a lack of human capacity and material resources as a contributing factor. In the eyes of local governance actors, politics and corruption were the major underlying causes of limited state capacity. As one interviewee (D) observed:

Concerning the level of politics, truly I am doubtful of the level of politics in the national government, even in general. I don't know if you have been following the news in the Zinder region. But really, here, on the regional level, it is not going well. They basically left the education system this year to itself because a new regional director was assigned at their (the regional) level. He has let politics interfere with his work. His staff appointments have been scattered and no one really understands what is going on. Now, in Zermou, we have a teacher deficit (personal interview, March 16, 2012).

Interviewee A explained that workers in the government have a greater loyalty to their political party than to the population, and therefore provide more resources (materials and teachers) to those individuals and villages that support their political party. Another case study performed in Zinder in 2008 corroborated these interviewees' perspectives (Miles 2008). As one school principal who left his post for political reasons noted, "in Niger, when you are suspected of belonging to a political party that is not in power, you are removed from your position of responsibility because you are considered an opponent (detractor of government policy)" (Miles 2008, p. 48).

Subjects expressed a lack of trust in the central and regional government throughout each interview. Three of five offered examples of materials that should have come to Zermou, but were never received, or were received, but the supplies were obviously insufficient for their needs. Four respondents spoke of receiving 30-40 notebooks for 320 students in the elementary school. Interviewee D clarified: "Normally, they [the supplies] are supposed to come from Guidimouni, but when you call to ask where the materials are, they say that they have been sent. But you don't really know if they have been sent or not" (personal interview, March 16, 2012). In

support of local interview subjects' questionable trust in upper tiers of government, the PDDE program review document addressing institutional development (2007) found a "lack of credibility" among those managing the human resources in each region.

Paradoxically, all of those interviewed indicated a drop in quality as a result of the education reforms over the past decade or so. All but one reported low teacher quality, poor working conditions and frequent strikes. Two respondents discussed how frequent teachers' strikes have led to weeks, even months in some instances, of missed school days. At least one day a week when there should be school, teachers are on strike, they explained. Three other respondents detailed the poorly-designed school curriculum contributing to a cycle of inadequately taught teachers instructing their pupils badly. Underlying these effects is the idea of superficial decentralization. One interviewee (C) suggested the central government's good intentions, citing President Issoufou's inaugural speech declaring the government would "bring value to the education system," but no implementation. Interviewee E also commented on the distinct disparity between the urban and rural schools in terms of the availability of materials and other resources. In reaction to this failure in central and regional government, two respondents explained that circumstance forces the local community to take responsibility for schools. Other interviewees agreed in later questions.

How does the central government prepare and support local education system staff, including school superintendents, principals, and teachers?

The consensus among the policy texts and the different interviewees is that the central and regional government has failed to manage the education system's human resources effectively; that is, the recruitment, training, assignment and pay of all staff working at the local level. All interviewees agreed the central and regional government is supposed to ensure remuneration of teachers as well as on-going training for them. Superintendents are trained for two years, regular teachers receive one year of education and contracted teachers obtain little or no support prior to taking their posts (Ministry of Education 2008b). As a matter of formal policy, school superintendents are charged with training primary school teachers at the local level with the support of officials from the central and regional governments.

One interviewee suggested that central and regional government had "given up" this role for the most part, or provided help in training "if it wants to do so" according to another, which local villagers interpret as a voluntary abandonment of responsibility. Preparatory and continued

training, for example, have been poor and insufficient, and teacher pay is inadequate to maintain a decent livelihood and is often provided late, when it is offered. All interviews confirmed the fact that the commune's school superintendent is officially in charge of training and monitoring the progress of primary school teachers. Without financial and material support from the region, however, the superintendent cannot do his job. Interviewee A reported:

If you take today as an example, the superintendent is faced with a good amount of work with teachers in the area. In actuality, every time we hear the superintendent talk, he has no support to travel around the commune, verify that teachers are at their posts and then turn around and tell those teachers, who are also working in difficult conditions, how to improve their teaching. The situation continues in which we do not have the basic means even to move around the commune (personal interview, March 2, 2012).

Interview subjects criticized the quality of teachers in today's school system, particularly the new contractual instructor program. Four of five interviewees specifically volunteered the contractual teacher program as an example of a bad reform. They argued the teachers are unqualified when they are hired and are then poorly trained, if trained at all. Many teachers hired cannot even read or write properly. These views match those offered in the PDDE (2008) review documents and the print media. The PDDE (2008) document on quality explains that these contractual teachers only have an elementary school education and are not given training to prepare them to teach young children. Those who are supposed to educate them, the school superintendent and other teachers in their school, do not possess appropriate competence to do so. The PDDE (2008) document on access furthermore explains the contractual teacher program was designed to increase the number of teachers who are permanent instructors, but instead some of these individuals end up in jobs other than instruction within the system (721 teachers of 20,040). Finally, a February 2012 article in the national newspaper, *La Griffé*, revealed a proliferation of fake diplomas in Niger that are being used to make individuals eligible to enter the contractual teacher program. Obviously, such a framework is unlikely to yield high-quality teachers (Hachimou 2012). Interviewee A also emphasized arguments originally offered by Murphy (2005), stating that these individuals have few other employment options, so they, quite literally, fall into the teaching profession by default. As a result, they are not motivated to do a good job.

Four of five interview subjects also mentioned the recurring teacher strikes that result from poor working conditions and low pay. Three of the respondents expressed the need for

some measure of solidarity within the community or recognition of responsibility by each actor within the governance system, including teachers, so that they each do their jobs. In contrast, four respondents also described the point of view of the teacher. Interviewee C explained that teachers are paid no more than 59,000 CFA a month (less than \$120 US), which is not sufficient, especially if one has a family. Each interviewee noted that teachers are often not paid on time. Those working in the junior high school in Zermou, for example, finally received their February pay near the end of March. Three interview respondents raised the question: What are teachers supposed to do when they are not paid much in the first place, but then have to wait more than a month to receive that pay? Under these circumstances, the interviewees said, it is necessary for instructors to abandon their posts and look for money elsewhere, most likely in the city. And yet, despite these poor conditions, Interviewee D said many teachers are still at their posts and do seek routinely to meet their responsibilities.

In summary, each interviewee revealed the complexities involved in evaluating teachers in the decentralized education system. Many criticized instructors, but then apologized for them because they lack government support to do their jobs and are, in many ways, conditioned to behave as they do. Respondents argued many teachers are unqualified; they abandon their posts randomly; they regularly strike; even when they are at their jobs, they may not be working; and they seem unmotivated to do their work. As a counterbalance to these views, interviewees stated teachers received the same poor education that they are now passing on to their students, and the government gives them little additional education to compensate for the deficit in knowledge; the nation does not provide the necessary materials and infrastructure to create a nurturing work environment for teachers and students to be successful; the pay that instructors receive is minimal and often late, leading them to leave their posts in search of more money elsewhere to sustain themselves and their families.

Two interview subjects (A & B) also contended that external donors, specifically the World Bank and IMF, are partially culpable for poor education quality. Interviewee A said:

It is because of external offers [of monetary aid] that the government has abandoned older methods of teaching. These are the effects. Foreigners prepare these different teaching methods to educate the poor [in] the underdeveloped countries. It is to experiment with these methods. And now they profit from the results. For us, it is an experiment. If it works, that's great. If it doesn't, it's our children that pay (personal interview, March 2, 2012).

According to two respondents, teaching has changed since the mid-1990s as a consequence of different reforms sponsored by external donors. For instance, the current teaching method of repeating phrases in different texts without explaining the meaning of the individual words, three respondents argued, is a failed experiment. It does not teach children to read and write. They only learn to repeat the phrases, whether they understand them or not. Many of these expressions are not even relevant to their daily lives. Furthermore, the nearly continuous reform of school procedures in Niger's schools (i.e., curricula, teaching methods and administrative processes) over the years has confused teachers and students alike. They may not all know the current approaches taken by the higher levels of government and outside agencies. Four interviewees described a decline in teaching quality over time as a direct result of these supposed "reforms."

What are the official roles of Zermou's citizens in supporting local community schools? In reality, how and how well do you think local citizens support local schools?

Within these questions, I examined local support and participation that were manifest in three different ways: local parent associations, the COGES and acts of individual parents. Through two interviews, as I note above, I discovered the Zermou parent association was no longer active. The president of the parent association, also the president of the COGES, died earlier in 2012. With his death, the parent association no longer exists. Interviewee B explained, "You know our overall problem in Africa is when an organization is created, only the head of that organization works. When the leader is gone, one can try to find the other members, but they are all inactive" (personal interview, April 8, 2012). He said if you had asked anyone in the community to identify a member of the parent association, no one would know, not even parents. Thus, even finding a former member of the parent association to interview further regarding this situation was impossible.

Interviewee B also said that with creation of the COGES, the parent association ceased to function regularly. Previously, the group had served as the heavy hand of the teachers when they had behavior problems with a student. Three interviewees mentioned teachers' lack authority because they are unable to punish students for disobedience. The parent association had previously compensated for that lack of authority by disciplining their children when needed. With creation of the COGES, the parents' association relinquished that role. The COGES, however, has not taken on that responsibility, focusing more on long-term project planning than current operational problems. Interviewee B explained the COGES did not take action often to

fix immediate “big problems” (personal interview, March 4, 2012). Interviewee D confirmed this statement by explaining that although the COGES should help to build school buildings (made of millet stalks) and raise funds for school activities or supplies, the group does not address those tasks. When asked, Interviewee B admitted that Committee members today were all teachers and the group had no real participation from parents or those outside the school system.

In contrast, the PDDE policy documents and the World Bank project both argue the COGES project nationwide has thus far been relatively successful as a decentralized structure. The World Bank (2011) reports that both the creation and training of committee groups is on track for completion by 2013. One interview subject confirms that Zermou’s COGES has received training from the regional government. The PDDE documents and World Bank report refer to the program as a national effort to build local capacity and encourage local participation in the school system. According to the documents, the African Development Fund suggests even more reliance on the oversight committees as a way of maintaining infrastructure and school supplies.

Descriptions of the official role of the COGES varied slightly during interviews, depending on the respondent. Interviewee A did not discuss the standing of the committee, but claimed it was essentially absent and there was no real organized civil society group in Zermou to help the school. Interviewee B said the role of the COGES was to discuss and find solutions to problems that arise in the schools. Interview subject C stated the group was responsible for paperwork, school activities and promotional campaigns for education. Interviewee D listed the following roles: recruit students, ensure regular attendance, build schools and raise local funds for school activities. Interview subject E did not discuss the role of the committee. While each of these stated responsibilities can fall under the entity’s jurisdiction, as described in the 2003-2013 PDDE reform plan, the variance between responses illustrates criticisms stated in the 2008-2010 PDDE program review: perceptions of the COGES’ mission are not aligned, causing confusion over conflicting competencies, missions and relative authority vis-à-vis other local governing structures.

The PDDE document describing institutional development focuses on one role for COGES that was uniformly embraced by my interviewees: informing community residents of the importance of education to future development in order to obtain its support of education reform. As such, the committee conducted a promotional campaign in which unidentified members

traveled around the commune, talking with parents about student attendance, girls' education and the importance of school construction. Two respondents reported they reached 80-90% of the schools in the Zermou commune. The PDDE review document describes other objectives of the COGES including: encouraging parent participation by offering specific training workshops that are close by, involving the community in the management of school resources and emboldening the community to engage in activities and put those endeavors in the action plan for the school. As illustrated by the fact that the COGES is made up almost solely of teachers, these sorts of nominal efforts have either not occurred or were unsuccessful.

Finally, all respondents said the most essential role of parents is to send their children to school. To that extent, all were very positive about parental support and participation. Three interviewees said that parents were "beginning to understand" the importance of education for their children, although two also described a remaining mistrust of the school system, particularly in more rural areas and when dealing with fundraising. Interviewee D explained that citizens in general were still tentative about government and public institutions because of what they have seen in the past and what they heard on the radio broadcasts. According to respondents, citizens assume, for instance, that their tax money will leave the community and they will never see benefits from providing it. Likewise, community residents assume school officials are corrupt. Thus, their lack of trust in government generally, and the school system particularly, leads to a lack of civic engagement (Interviewee D, personal interview, March 16, 2012).

All respondents also said parents had few resources to contribute and little ability (particularly in terms of their own limited education) truly to support schools very much. Interviewee A was somewhat more optimistic than the rest, stating parents should attempt to engage in the education of their children. He cited parents who have shown interest in their children's academic progress and have also asked teachers to hold their children back a grade when their youngsters have not made sufficient progress that year. Interviewee A also stated a desire for parents to have the capacity to hold schools accountable so that the education system may improve.

What are the official roles of Zermou's municipal office in supporting local community schools? In reality, how and how well do you think the municipality supports local schools?

None of the policy documents I examined discuss the role of localities in schools. The official role of the municipality is to provide “public services that address the needs of the population and which do not fall, by their nature or importance, within the jurisdiction of the State” (Peace Corps-Niger 2007, p. 24). Thus, local government has no official role in state-run schools. Interviewees confirmed this fact. However, they also indicated the local government does play a part nevertheless. Three interviewees said the municipality helps when it can. One interviewee said, “The municipality also really contributes to our work. Each time we have need of something, for example, one can go to see the municipality. The mayor’s office truly contributes to our capacity” (Interview D, personal interview, March 16, 2012). When the COGES conducted its promotional campaign, for instance, the local government financed the campaign by contributing 150,000-200,000CFA (\$300-400 US) from its annual budget.

Interviewee C said this support was based on the overlap in school and municipal personnel that has led to a strong relationship and personal investment from community staff. Many elected municipal officials currently or formerly worked in the school system, including this specific primary school in Zermou. Interviewee B attributed this support to a larger ideology: everyone should be responsible for education and maintain a sense of solidarity within their community. But, Interviewee B also described a more pernicious, self-centered mentality in Niger. This perspective focuses more on “what’s in it for me?” than how to contribute to the community as a whole. This outlook has resulted in little implementation of decentralized reforms and, in general, a lack of action for the public good from all parties involved in governance (Interviewee B).

Despite evident support from the municipality, all five interviewees also clarified that Zermou’s municipal office did not have the authority or ability to take on many education-related duties. While one interviewee conveyed the desire to give the community more responsibility concerning the education system to encourage greater local accountability, another opined that the local government did not have the capacity to manage the training of commune teachers. The PRS report agreed with interviewee statements, referring to the local government decentralization process:

However, the novelty of the process poses a number of difficulties for the local authorities, in particular: (i) inadequate financial resources; (ii) low transformation of national policies and strategies into local and community guidelines; (iii) poor coordination of the various ministerial structures claiming leadership of the decentralization process; (iv) low institutional capacities of the new councils and lack of preparation of stakeholders (Niger Government 2008, p. 65).

These weaknesses run parallel with the vulnerabilities of the decentralized education system.

B. Accountability

Accountability is “the ability of citizens to hold their leaders, governments and public organizations responsible for their actions” (DFID 2007, p. 18). Embedded in this idea are transparency of institutions and the ability of citizens to participate in the governance process in some way. During interviews, I said I wished to explore respondents’ perceptions of the lines of accountability between local/central governments, schools and individuals who ensure that each of these groups do their jobs effectively. I explained that, ideally, these institutions should monitor each other so that each is held responsible for its actions or inaction. Based on policy documents and interviews, accountability is a top-down process for the most part, with little input from community members, suggesting a completely absent culture of accountability among local players.

How does the central government monitor the performance of Zermou’s schools and school officials? How often does this occur?

Policy documents and interviewees described a lack of accountability and monitoring on the part of the central government. The PDDE (2008) review argued the lack of responsibility and accountability within the government hierarchy exists partially because the current system has few clearly defined roles and jobs and also because there is no system to monitor the distribution of material and financial resources. The PRS (2008) report revealed the resulting corruption. As part of the investigation, the Niger government conducted an audit of public service offices. That effort identified about 60 cases of misappropriation of funds. The African Development Fund (2009) completion report also illustrated a failure in monitoring when NIGETIP (a government-run construction company) and other contracted agencies built several poorly-constructed school facilities throughout Niger.

All interviewees said the regional inspector from Guidimouni is supposed to visit and monitor school expenditures at least twice a year, but does not. One reason, stated by three

respondents, is the rural nature and distance of Zermou from the Inspection, or regional administrative offices, in Guidimouni. “Zermou has a periphery problem,” Interviewee C explained, “The inspector does not live here. Guidimouni is 40 to 45km from here, and it is difficult to get here. So the chef secteur (superintendent) usually gets the information and relays it to the Inspection” (personal interview, March 9, 2012). Three respondents said that responsibility for regional monitoring falls to the school superintendent. This periphery problem is indicative of the limited capacity of regional government to fulfill its assigned accountability role. In contrast, Interviewee A argued the central problem is truly a lack of political will or absence of a culture of accountability at the grassroots level, “Even authorities are not for schools. If you ask them to pass by your school, they are going to ask you if you are trying to create problems. No one wants to pass by the school because if they did, and saw problems, they would have to report them” (personal interview, March 2, 2012). Still, Interviewee D contested government’s right to hold schools, meaning teachers, accountable when the government cannot even pay teachers on time or deliver a sufficient amount of school supplies in a timely manner (personal interview, March 16, 2012).

How do Zermou’s citizens monitor and survey Zermou’s elementary school curricula and educational effectiveness?

According to the PDDE program review on institutional development, the COGES is supposed to offer citizens opportunities to engage in school management and activities that would encourage greater accountability between parents and the schools. All interviewees revealed that, in reality, there were no real official lines of accountability between citizens and their schools, and it was more the role of central and regional government to hold schools accountable for their actions than it was that of the committee partly created for that purpose. Only one interviewee said the COGES represented the line of accountability between the two groups, but even this individual was skeptical of its actual effectiveness. As noted above, Interviewee A expressed a desire for parents to exercise greater authority to hold teachers and other school staff accountable; however, he and three other interviewees viewed parents as having little capacity, in both understanding and capability, to do so.

Two interviewees volunteered examples of informal lines of accountability. First, traditionally teachers were from the village or commune and thus were held accountable for their

actions via family social networks. While this tradition has deteriorated somewhat with more immigration of teachers from different regions, most teachers in Zermou are still from the village. Second, several mothers have set up an informal monitoring system and market by bringing food and school supplies to sell to students. As Interviewee E explained, “They have a relationship [with the school]. They give food. They sit and watch the work done at the school” (personal interview, March 16, 2012).

What are the principal lines of accountability between the school system and the municipal government?

Similarly, the municipal government has only informal lines of accountability with the school system. Four interviewees said the town wants to help and does so when it can. Interviewee C offered the example of Zermou’s Vice Mayor driving around the village on his motorcycle to make sure every teacher is at their post. Still, all respondents claimed the municipality lacks capacity to provide effective oversight of the schools. Although, unlike the provision of services, resources and training, most respondents seemed to think the community’s lack of capacity was more its limited authority than its ability. Indeed, Interviewee A argued that accountability is central to decentralization, and without an authority at the local level (citing the municipality as a candidate), decentralization does not really exist (personal interview, March 2, 2012). Interviewee B agreed. The only reference to local government in education policy documents, as stated above, mentions the COGES’ unclear mission and relative authority with other local governance structures, begging the question, how do the committees and municipality relate/interact?

C. Responsiveness

Responsiveness deals with, “how leaders, governments and public organizations actually behave in responding to the needs and rights of citizens” (DFID 2007, p. 18). If these institutions are corrupt or lack sufficient capacity, they will not be responsive to the needs of their people. During interviews, I asked about respondents’ perceptions of the ability of the central and local governments, school officials and citizens to understand and respond to each other’s needs, framing this ability as a key element in maintaining and improving the school system. Because of the way I asked my questions, there was much discussion about communication between different entities and if they ever responded to each other if one governance agent asked for help.

Responses to these questions often blended with questions in the previous two sections, although there was greater emphasis in the various replies concerning the lack of public space or access for citizens to engage in governance-support activities compared to the other two question categories.

How do the chains of communication operate between the central government and the local school system? How responsive are national government representatives to the demands /goals of those running the local school system?

Policy documents and interviewees concur that Niger's central and regional governments should make a greater effort to communicate and respond to local needs. Four policy documents describe the ministry of education's limited communication with its local partners and other on-the-ground actors. The PDDE (2008) review claimed the system did not have "a culture of communication or information sharing," particularly when it came to issues like revising the national curriculum. The PDDE (2008) and PRS (2009) reports called for greater public relations with citizens via public media. Likewise, all interviewees described a limited, hierarchical system in which all information is filtered through the school superintendent. Interviewee B explained the process:

Each time a teacher talks, there is a form that he fills out. Now when the form is filled out, now at the end of the lesson for instance, the superintendent comes to collect it. This is what is done normally. Now the superintendent signs the form and sends it to the Inspection (in Guidimouni). The inspector reads and analyzes the form, adds his advice, signs it and sends it to the regional Inspection (in Zinderville). Thus the director of education, at least he used to, he sends it all to the national ministry of education (personal interview, April 8, 2012).

This convoluted system of information sharing is deeply flawed as it prevents the input and participation of other actors in upper levels of government communication, slows government response time and allows for gaps in the system where information is lost.

While the upward communication seems very systematic, downward communication is rare according to four interviewees. Interviewee E recollected that some local school officials have talked to the Inspection on the telephone before, but almost never in person (personal interview, March 16, 2012). Interviewee D referred to the long distance between Zermou and Guidimouni as well as the lack of trust he had in the regional government, declaring he tries not to go to Guidimouni because, "I am going to have to search. I lose time going there. I will not get

anything there. So it's not worth going." He said the Inspection rarely has or provides resources such as school supplies. He also mentioned that teachers were actually paid in Mirriah, so there was very little incentive ever really to visit the Inspection (personal interview, March 16, 2012).

The little communication between the upper and lower levels of the school system has limited responsiveness between the central and regional governments. All interview respondents claimed the central and regional governments do not respond to local school needs. All interviewees offered their limited school resources—buildings mostly made of millet stalks, poor working conditions for teachers and students, poorly paid and unqualified instructors—as examples of how the government does not respond to local needs. A recent African Development Fund (2009) report argued that central government needs to make greater efforts to respond to staff needs such as calls for better conditions and salaries, particularly if it is to retain even minimally qualified teachers.

Three of the five interviewees (A, B and D) contended that one reason the central and regional government is less responsive to the needs of schools, especially rural ones, is that most of these officials send their own children to private institutions that have resources to provide a high-quality education. Central and regional officials, therefore, have no incentive to invest in public schools. These respondents also contended that the national government takes foreign aid dollars, but allocates the money to other functions. They were not specific about where the money goes, if it was for government employees' own personal use or for different public services. One respondent did mention the nicer buildings in Niamey, some that looked as if they could be in Paris or New York, and implied that some government funds went into the construction of aggrandized infrastructure (D). Interviewee D said:

Nigeriens really have to sit and reflect on the ways of things, of this mess we are in. Unfortunately, I have wondered for at least two months now if they [the regional government] have given up on us. Everyone says it's because their children are not in the public schools. It's for that reason that they've given up on public schools. All they do is finish their reform intervention with their international partners so they can get the money to eat up (use) and leave the population as it is (personal interview, March 16, 2012).

These comments support claims by four respondents that the much touted education decentralization reforms are superficial and perhaps intentionally so. Moreover, the same three respondents emphasized at different times during their interviews that regional government encourages teachers to push all their students through to the next grade level at the end of each

year even if the children did not reach the level necessary to advance. This political pressure from above results in a high annual student pass rate, which is an indicator of success in the PDDE reform program. The 2011 World Bank project report, for example, declared this metric “achieved.”

Three interviewees (C, D and E) also referred to the role of NGOs when discussing the failure of the central and regional government. Each interviewee expressed the desire to have an INGO in the sub-region, arguing that such civil society organizations are far more reliable than the government. Unlike other sub-region Inspections in the region, Guidimouni does not have NGO support. Two respondents reported that schools with NGO support enjoyed more resources. Related to this fact, interviewees A and D said schools that do have this NGO resource, those that have partnered with INGOs such as Save the Children, for example, have also collaborated with Zermou schools. The Zermou primary school has been able to ask these other institutions for extra school supplies and furniture when needed.

How do the chains of communication operate within and between the school system, the municipality and the local population? How responsive are these groups to each other's concerns?

According to all four respondents who discussed the COGES⁷ and the PDDE review document on institutional development, the Committee is the official line of communication among citizens, parents, the local government and the primary school's staff and administration. The COGES is supposed to inform the population of the importance of education in order to obtain its support. Zermou's COGES exercised this role, with the help of the municipal office, during its 2011 education promotional campaign. However, three of the four interview subjects also expressed the view that the committee was less than responsive to immediate school needs. Instead it tends to focus more on long-term planning and efforts to address the mistrust and apathy expressed by parents toward schools.

In theory, the COGES should include teachers, parents and other eager community members, serving as a space for collaboration to improve responsiveness and education service delivery. As Interviewee C said, “In each village where there is a school, there is this community, and it's from that you can see a parent in the COGES, discussing the weaknesses, and through that, finding solutions” (personal interview, March 9, 2012). In reality, however,

⁷ Only two interviewees mentioned the COGES outright. The other two I prompted. Interviewee E had nothing to say on the topic.

interviewees revealed that the committee is simply made up of teachers and school principals. Interviewee C continued, saying, “If the school is going to work well, help from the community is necessary. Teachers cannot sustain the school on their own” (personal interview, March 9, 2012).

Parents have demonstrated responsiveness to school needs to the best of their ability according to four of five interviewees. But with the failure of central and regional government to fulfill its legal obligation, the responsibility falls to parents to buy school supplies for their children. Some parents manage this while others either cannot or will not. Interviewee E explained that parents talk amongst each other, they listen to the radio and as such, they are at least generally aware of the local schools’ needs. Moreover, they want a sense of community within the school system. Interviewee E described how mothers bring food to the primary school, as a sort of informal canteen that provides cheap snack items, as an example of parent responsiveness as well as entrepreneurialism. Concurrently, however, many parents still lack trust in the school system, according to four respondents, which makes engagement in the schools—such as raising funds for supplies—difficult. All interview subjects also reiterated that parents have few resources to contribute in any case.

Interviewee replies to municipal responsiveness questions were similar to those offered to the accountability queries. Respondents said the community has no formal lines of communication with the school, but informal ties exist. Because many municipal officials have a professional connection with the school system, two respondents indicated they had regular conversations with education administrators. Still, three interviewees pointed to the community’s absence of any local authority over schools and its limited ability to take full responsibility for the commune’s educational system unless provided additional resources by the central and regional governments.

D. Conclusion

Several themes emerged from my analysis of the interviews and policy documents related to the schools in Niger. In the eyes of this study’s interviewees, for instance, their decentralized education system is an example of a “reform” imposed on the Niger government. External agents from the World Bank, IMF and other governments/agencies have leveraged their aid to encourage this change, but the Nigerien government (or different branches of that government) has not fully embraced those changes to make them more than simply superficial. Policy

documents and political speeches signal an intention to improve education quality through decentralization. However, only very limited implementation has followed. As such, my respondents essentially blamed national and external forces for the negative effects these reforms have had at the local level: the declining quality of primary and secondary education in Niger due to few resources, poor teaching quality and overall harsh working conditions for students and teachers. In contrast, they consider international NGOs as essential for attaining school resources and improving educational conditions. Unfortunately, however, Zermou has no INGO providing aid to schools currently.

When examining the vertical governance structure of central and regional to local entities, interviewees and policy documents aligned. Both indicated central and regional governments have the ultimate authority to provide financial, material and training support to local schools. These tiers of government should also monitor and hold schools accountable as well as be responsive to the needs of local constituencies. Yet, the central and regional governments have not fulfilled these responsibilities. Where policy documents and Zermou's community perspectives diverge is on the reason why the central and regional government is not executing its authority. My interviewees in Zermou attribute this failure in the state primarily to politics and corruption. Indeed, only a few respondents mentioned potential weaknesses in the state's ability to provide these services. Meanwhile, the state and external organization policy documents blame central and regional government's limited ability for its relative lack of performance: poorly trained administrative staff, few resources, limited communication and a weak institutional structure.

The rigid hierarchical structure of the education system also impedes communication and effectiveness both vertically and horizontally. Because authority over schools is concentrated in the hands of central and regional government, local actors believe they have little authority, and thus ability, to carry out tasks. Accountability and most of the communication structure flows in a top-down direction only. Local governance actors have a difficult time communicating with or holding central and regional actors accountable for their actions or inactions. The only interactions with regional government are forms sent through the superintendent to regional offices and rare interactions between the sub-regional inspector and school agents. This network puts much of the burden of accountability on a regional government that may be too distant to hold local actors accountable. At the same time, it leaves local actors powerless to hold other

community and regional stakeholders accountable, and does not allow locals to report failures in their institutions to the regional government effectively. For instance, if parents want to complain about the lack of school supplies or teacher absences, they have no recourse to do so except to fill out a form for the school superintendent. Thereafter, they may or may not receive an answer after the form has gone through the proper channels. Indeed, many parents may not even know of this process since its salience appears to be limited largely to those working in the school system.

The formal horizontal governance structure encompasses the school, COGES, parents, parent associations and the local government. Yet, local roles vary widely within this framework according to both my interviewees and policy documents. This study's respondents report they possess limited ability to carry out the official and unofficial roles envisioned for them. Probably the most contentious actor in this group is the COGES. As a relatively new structure created by the central government, its mission seems broad-based, yet it has little material support from government and only some assistance from local actors. The purpose of the committee, according to policy documents, is to encourage community engagement, but it is important to note that in reality, its members consist primarily of teachers. The local parents association that existed until recently became relatively inactive with the creation of the COGES, but the new, parentless organization has not performed the tasks previously addressed by the parent's group. Thus, when comparing the vision of COGES as compared to its reality in terms of focus (big picture versus small projects), ability to carry out tasks, and its supposedly decentralized, grassroots perspective, the committee's effectiveness in contributing to the education system is questionable.

Expectations concerning parents' involvement in schools also vary, most distinctly between interviewees and policy documents. State policies call on parents to become more involved in school functioning, but all interviewees suggested they were pleased when parents simply understood the importance of school and made daily efforts to have their children attend. Some interviewees indicated they would welcome still greater parental involvement in their children's education, but qualified this desire with the fact that parents have little ability to do so due to limited time, money and their own poor educational background and relative knowledge. In short, the failures of the central government have led to de facto local responsibility for schools. However, when different community actors do not have the ability to support their schools, the burden falls solely on school principals and teachers to do so who, as indicated

above may also lack sufficient education, training and salaries to support even their own livelihoods.

Despite limitations in ability and authority to act, local actors have demonstrated a measure of responsiveness to school needs and have collaborated to bring about solutions. The COGES sees parents' lack of understanding of the importance of schooling to be one of the major problems in the school system. It has, therefore, developed the previously-identified promotional campaign. Interviewees report that when they can, parents do buy their children school supplies and some have actively monitored their children's progress and used their authority to hold their children back a grade level if need be. Parents also recognized their children should have food during the day and, as a result, some mothers have begun selling snack food when the students are on break. This system also allows those parents so engaged to watch their children and to learn more about their school. Most respondents, however, were skeptical of the ability of parents or any community member to go so far as provide substantial resources or hold school officials accountable for their work, particularly when those officials are not given the resources necessary to do their own jobs. The municipality helped the Committee fund its promotional campaign. Local government also helps when it can by seeking to ensure teachers are at their posts. For their part, some school officials have made efforts to work with schools outside the commune, which possess INGO-provided curricular resources as a means of accessing more school materials.

Much of this collaboration or lack of collaboration is rooted in the degree of trust among the actors involved. As noted above, several interview subjects argued that central and regional government does not respond or act to address school needs because most of these officials send their kids to private school. Inherent in this explanation is profound mistrust among locals of central and regional government's intentions to consider the needs of local constituencies and affect beneficial reform in the Nigerien education system. Likewise, according to respondents, parents and citizens mistrust local government and the schools alike. Interviewee C referenced historic, colonial reasons, such as schools as sites that imposed Christianity and an alien language on citizens. Other respondents referenced citizens experiencing corruption, even at the local level; for example, regional government officials collect taxes, but local citizens never seeing money or services returned. This mistrust in other institutional actors hinders collaboration to the extent that seemingly simple tasks are difficult; for example, combining

funds that parents intend to spend on their children's school supplies in order to obtain them in bulk at reduced cost. When I asked three respondents why they do not do this type of project, they responded that no one would cooperate because they believed teachers would pocket most of the money in lieu of using it as intended.

Furthermore, interviewees highlighted the importance of community leadership and the motivations of those leaders. Central and regional government leaders, according to respondents, have little motivation to help local school systems, and so very little happens to assist schools. The leader of the parent association and COGES died recently. As a result, the parent association fell apart. In contrast, the COGES, which may have a stronger institutional structure because all of its members are currently in the education system, is still present although weak, according to one interview subject. Former and current schoolteachers, who have a personal investment in the education system, run Zermou's municipality; therefore, the local government has been somewhat responsive to the needs of the school despite its lack of formal responsibility, limited authority and ability to assist.

VI. DISCUSSION

The perceptions of individuals reported in this case study have illustrated many of the criticisms of capacity-building reform initiatives discussed in today's governance, good governance and decentralization literature. These concerns include:

- The modernist/neoliberal tendency to focus on results rather than the process, which contributes to too superficial implementation of reforms;
- The imposition of change from foreign donors and agencies as opposed to bottom-up reform, which roots reform within the context of the development situation;
- Neopatrimonial activities that arise in the governance system (e.g. politicization of the education service sector and corruption);
- Deconcentration of a central governance system rather than assuring steps and capacity to devolve authority and decision-making to the local scale;
- Very limited resources and capacity of local government to carry out decentralized policy even if authority and decision-making were devolved meaningfully to the community level;
- The need for a strong, central government to provide resources so that decentralization is effective;
- The pivotal role of community leaders in supporting capacity-building reform initiatives;
- Greater need for more open participatory public space so that citizens are better engaged in the governance process;
- The necessity of trust among democratic governance actors: one aspect that I did not consider in the literature review, but that the interviews revealed as also very important.

The alignment of these ideas in the literature and the sentiments expressed by local villagers in Zermou reveals a classic case of poor good governance reform implementation and false decentralization. This section further analyzes these themes as they intersect with the viewpoints of local village respondents, and discusses the reasons why respondents maintain these views and the behaviors that arise from them at the local level. I will further discuss, based on the contextual situation and constraints found in Zermou, what further actions may be taken to improve the effectiveness of the local primary school.

A. Poorly Implemented Capacity-Building Reforms Hinder Local Capacity

While my local respondents may agree with the precepts behind good governance, decentralization reforms, and even tout their benefits, they consider the current initiatives to be poorly implemented. These capacity-building reforms are superficial and imposed by external actors. The central government still wields most authority and the ability to implement these

various reforms, but it has elected not to do so. Rather, according to interviews, it simply accepts policies suggested by international institutions such as the World Bank and IMF in order to acquire the aid money that accompanies them. Central and regional government implements these changes as much as is needed to satisfy the indicators of success as defined in the initiatives. These indicators are easily quantifiable such as primary gross enrollment rates, completion rates and gender parity. Without more detail and a proper context, governments can easily manipulate these metrics, reporting great improvements to donors when little advancement or perhaps even worsening conditions have actually resulted. Thus, today, teachers have little authority in their classrooms as regional government pressures them to pass their students onto the next grade at the end of the year, regardless of whether a student is ready to move forward or not. More and more parents are encouraged to send their children to school to increase enrollment rates despite the fact that the quality of education is so low and the schools are closed so much of the time that it is doubtful that the children will gain enough knowledge even to read or write their own names.

Meanwhile, the contractual teacher program has significantly lowered the quality of instructors in the system, and these class leaders are not paid enough to provide them an incentive to do their jobs properly. As a result, Zermou now has even less educational expertise as a resource in its community than it did before the imposition of this “reform.” With the creation of the COGES, the parent association, which had been fulfilling a community need, ceased its actions and is now extinct. According to interviewee descriptions, the committee is in some ways just another branch of bureaucracy that focuses on planning and strategizing with no intent to implement. As a result, the locality has lost a useful institutional actor and is left with one that is neither active in day-to-day operations nor grassroots-based (engaging local citizens). In addition to poorly implemented and insufficiently supported reforms, the roles of governance actors are vague and tend to overlap so that the local community is unsure of who has the responsibility to act and even questions its own authority to act. Localities thus lack authority and resources to do their jobs or help, and few community members actually know what is happening, who is in charge and who to go to for answers. The result of this situation is continuing confusion among actors and relative stagnation in the town’s educational system. In essence, these reforms have resulted in the opposite of what international development experts

intended for them; they have damaged local responsiveness and capacity to support the local school system.

One could use this example as a reason to argue that Niger should refuse foreign aid or why external agents should continue their assistance. There would be less accountability to outside actors and more to national citizens. There would be less push for quick turn-around on development indicators such as student enrollment and pass rates, and more focus on whether citizens are getting the services they request and the quality of that assistance. Such are the arguments of scholars like Dambisa Moyo (2009). Based on respondents' calls for NGO aid in their commune and my own experience as a Peace Corps volunteer, however, community members in Zermou may not agree with this argument. Certainly, dependence on foreign aid through financial assistance and NGO aid exists and may result in weakened institutional structures. But, all village respondents suggested the dire need for more resources if they are to do their jobs and help the country and populace move towards self-sufficiency. Currently, they are not equipped to even attempt self-sufficiency. More than fifty percent of Niger's GDP is from foreign aid, and the country is still one of the poorest in the world. While the nation is making an effort to open its doors to foreign direct investment, it may not have the physical and human infrastructure to develop an economy and attract enough private investment to make up for a loss in foreign aid, any time in the next several decades. That loss in aid may simply send the country into a tailspin depression that they are incapable of escaping by themselves. The country is simply far too weak.

Rather, to assist Niger more effectively, foreign donors could put less emphasis on established development indicators and more weight on the process—how central and regional government is going about the reform—and the benefits and costs of those actions as reported by citizens. That is not to say funders should dictate the process to the government, but instead monitor the ways in which reform happens at the local and regional levels and offer technical assistance and capacity-building when necessary. This kind of measurement is undoubtedly more difficult to track and quantify however, it is to the advantage of the funder as well as to the country if they conjointly develop viable solutions to established needs. If current use of the funds is not addressing the stated need and potentially resulting in poorer outcomes, either different development indicators or a different way of measuring outcomes may result in a better use of their funds. By engaging actors at all levels in developing strategies that will work in

Niger (given its culture, physical environment and the level of various infrastructures), there is a greater potential for success. These strategies could provide more voice to citizens and, increase their sense of accountability while acknowledging the evolutionary and adaptive process that such reforms require. Changes in policy document suggestions for organizational and institutional development could help by undergirding this process.

B. Reasons for Poor Implementation by Government

The contrasting views among interviewees and policy documents concerning the reasons why central and regional government are ineffective and often inactive in local education are similar to the difference between organizational and institutional development. As detailed above, organizational development deals with the day-to-day management of resources within a given agency and the capacity to carry out those tasks. Policy documents and a minority of respondents argue for the need of more organizational development in the form of better training and provision of resources for those at the regional level of government in charge of resource management. Meanwhile, institutional development deals more with the rules, both formal and informal, that govern the management of those resources and the agency(ies) as a whole. Institutional development includes formal networks, such as government policy and oversight or influences from the private sector and media, as well as the informal rules that affect individual and collective behaviors (DFID 2007). The local respondents' principal stated reason for government ineffectiveness is the central and regional government's tendency toward classic neopatrimonialism, a contributing factor and result of weak institutional development. Many government agents are corrupted by political allegiances, favoritism and an ongoing struggle for power and advantage. As a result, in the eyes of localities, central and regional government officials only implement reform if it pleases them, if they personally benefit in some way.

As the interview results revealed, there are few lines of accountability that connect rural localities to officials in the regional and central government. In other words, central and regional service providers see little direct benefit to themselves by serving these rural communities and improving their public education systems since they send their own children to private schools and as no one regularly monitors their actions. So beyond the fact that it is their job to provide these services, taking these actions may be more work than they are motivated to do and, in some cases, capable of doing. One reason for this behavior is the deconcentrated governance system found in Niger. The national education system is administered at the regional level (and, for the

most part, at the local level), meaning roles are delegated to central government-assigned regional agents and these regional officials have limited decision-making power. As such, there is a complete disconnect between those in charge of managing resources and the constituencies they are serving. Zermou's villagers have no authority to hold these government agents accountable.

Furthermore, respondents revealed that citizens also feel they have limited authority and capacity to hold other local actors (i.e., school officials) accountable for their work. This sentiment is, in part, due to the existing vertical governance structure. Interviewees linked the authority and capacity to provide resources with the right to hold actors accountable. If the regional and central government provide the resources and support, it has the right to hold the schools accountable; in contrast, as one interviewee stated, if this authority fails to provide resources and support, the right to hold teachers and principals accountable is questionable. Local citizens are left out of this conversation, treated as mere consumers of the product. As these citizens see it, they do not provide resources or support, ergo they have no rights to accountability. Yet, they are present within the community, they have "eyes on the ground", and are in some ways more capable of monitoring than their regional government counterparts. As such, they should be involved in the delivery, oversight or improvement of these services. The institutional structure may have created this disjuncture in which now localities feel powerless. Thus even though communities are the ones receiving these services, even though they have greater capability in some ways than higher tiers of government, even their small acts of monitor, as described above, are not truly effective or meaningful.

Politics, corruption and an organizational structure that leaves localities powerless to voice their concerns to government results in poor reform implementation, which in turn, creates a situation of learned mistrust among governance actors at the local level. That situation, in its turn, shapes the level of engagement each actor is willing to undertake. This mistrust has been ingrained within the culture since colonialism. Considering Niger's history of imperial rule, followed by successive dictatorships and weak democracies, it is no surprise that trust in the government to provide quality services is minimal. Yet, there still is an attitude among some citizens that the national government *should* provide these services. In this view, it is the nation's responsibility to provide "quality education for all." This attitude illustrates a range in trust from complete avoidance of government (demonstrated by parents who avoid sending their children to

school), to mistrust accompanied by some belief that the situation should and can improve (as seen by those I interviewed), and ending with the sentiment that government does its job and is trustworthy (not present at this time).

When considering levels of trust, engagement and capacity in each actor, one can imagine an XYZ graph that charts each of these factors (see Figure 6 below). As actors' trust and capacity of governance increase, so does engagement in governance activities. Inherent in this diagram, however, is the belief that as trust and capacity rise, so, too, does the belief among the actors involved that engagement and collaborative governance improve conditions in society. Unfortunately, as matters now stand, those stakeholders who demonstrate limited engagement are more consumers of public services in a marketized democracy than active citizens.

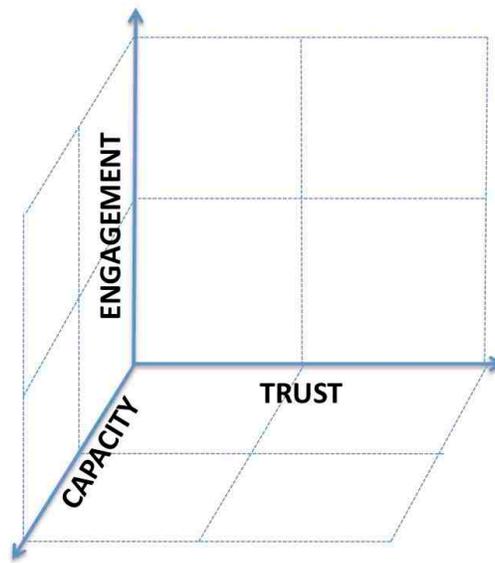


Figure 6 - Conditions for Civic Engagement

According to interview subjects, local citizens and groups lack this trust and the capacity to engage in the governance of schools, making the entire purpose of the good governance decentralization reform initiative moot. In this graph, local citizens find themselves in the corner, or running along the inner edge of the trust axis, with no capacity to move out into the space of good governance. They need strong, central government to give them the push they need to make things happen. Right now, according to interviews however, their national government accepts cash from foreign donors and files the reports necessary to keep that flow of support. While circumstances at the national level may be more complicated than this description, and

indeed some interviewees acknowledged as much, the sheer disparity in opinion between national and local entities and conditions at the local level as expressed by interviewees indicate a serious failure in the system. Respondents repeatedly voiced the need for strong central government to initiate and sustain reforms through transfer of resources and expertise as well as to develop improved mechanisms for accountability. While these steps alone are not sufficient to build complete trust they do represent a significant start.

C. “Good Enough Governance” at the Local Level

The current vertical governance structure that makes up the education system in Niger is not functioning as intended. Services and resources are not moving to the local level and there are barriers to bottom-up input. As a result, local actors often see themselves as abandoned by their national institutions and cut off from external funding support, essentially victims of expectations imposed upon them without adequate authority or resources. Thus, the question at the end is how can these local actors maneuver among the political shoals to address the problem at hand: the failing education system in Zermou.

When asked what they would do to make the situation better, all interview subjects paused before stating how difficult and complex a situation they faced. If they did answer further, they discussed what the central and regional government could do to help. While the respondents uniformly expressed a sense of powerlessness, each interviewee described ways in which different community members currently were responding to the needs of the school. Interviewees suggested that even with insufficient resources and expertise, local governance actors have the will and ingenuity to make situations work. Through increased collaboration, these participants could improve that responsiveness and perhaps even create what might be labeled *doable* acts of governance.

Building trust may be easier at the local level as that is where individuals develop personal relationships with one another. As community leaders generally have a constituency that trusts them to lead, these individuals have the capacity to leverage that trust to encourage engagement between different groups. Municipal leaders, for instance, have the trust of many different citizens, women’s and other civil society groups, and the school. Reflecting on Robert Putnam (1995), the municipality therefore could potentially use its social capital to bridge the gap between these groups. Likewise, in order to build trust, principals and teachers could offer public space, or free and open space for social and political engagement, for parents and teachers

to interact and find common ground. This process could be addressed through the COGES so that the intended “grassroots,” decentralized arm of the government would actually involve multiple community actors, not just teachers. Working through the committees could help to establish a common understanding of the committee’s purpose, its focus and its parameters, enabling local actors to move forward to develop strategies to address gaps. This understanding also would foster trust among the various actors as it aligns their perceptions with the reality of what the COGES can or cannot do.

Finding time and incentives to encourage engagement are two constraining factors in this process of trust building. When discussing the promotional education campaign, one interviewee suggested that it would have been better to hold the meetings at night. As a Peace Corps volunteer, I often found night meetings to have a more successful turnout, particularly when dealing with women. Incentives to participate need to be provided as well, through encouragement and leveraging from trusted community leaders and friends, as well as emphasizing the belief that education is important and needs to be promoted for future societal development.

Building a network among multiple players also strengthens project and activity implementation, providing a more solid foundation. This is key as it fosters commitment and higher level of trust among multiple actors rather than relying upon a single individual. Relying on one person may seem faster and more effective in the short term, but an engaged group that argues at times, as described by Biaocchi (2003), may develop a more sustainable participatory governance system in the long-term. These constraints are not easy to overcome and require diligence and commitment from the community. In addition, there is greater potential for the sustainability of a program or initiative when the leader is no longer present.

One instance where this community collaboration could be introduced is in advocating for education in the community. One of the shared beliefs among many of the policy documents and interviewees was the importance of promoting education to the larger public. Fortunately, this belief does exist among some local actors who are willing to participate in its improvement. Providing support to this group will make it easier to gradually obtain buy-in from other community members. Through collaboration among different actors, a school may then have the capacity to improve its working conditions and overall educational impact on the wider community. It is that impact that could sway citizens’ opinions of the importance of education.

All interviewees highlighted the importance of parents understanding the significance of school, and therefore sending their children each day. As such, the promotional campaigns to encourage school enrollment and schoolhouse building are important. In one interview, I asked about alternative ways of getting the word out besides the resource-draining caravan around the commune approach. As a volunteer, I had used the local radio station to publicize a community event that had seemed successful. The interviewee replied that the radio station had not been functioning since November 2011 and many people now only listen to radio from outside Niger. I was surprised by the interviewee's latter point because I had heard villagers, particularly women listening to radio from Zermou and the Zinder capital while I lived in Niger. This statement also contradicted publicized plans by the national government to use radio to communicate better with citizens about its activities; these plans are a waste of money and effort if this statement is true. Moreover, the loss of the radio station illustrates another constraint to community development: the easily lost and difficult recovery of important capital assets. Another suggestion might be to hold events on market days, when more people are gathered in town. During elections, political groups took advantage of this day to get the word out about their campaigns. Community proponents of the school system could take a similar approach.

D. Conclusion

Despite the failures of government and the poorly implemented capacity-building initiatives up to this point, interviews and policy reports have shown sparks of potential. In many respects, the intentions of central and regional government, schools, citizens and local municipal actors seem to be on the right track. The focus on strengthening individual and institutional capacities, a greater focus on monitoring, promoting education among citizens, encouraging engagement at the local level and local responsiveness when able are all good building blocks toward improved education if they are actually implemented in a contextualized manner. The difficulty is the time, resources and diligence it takes to build the institutional culture and civic mentality that will make this public service effective. How long do you have to wait to discern if these reforms will have beneficial results? When do you change your approach, particularly if you are central government or some other large institution observing on the macro level? Nigeriens often reply, "Sai Honkuri" (have patience) when faced with uncertainty. This situation may be the ideal case for such a response. Although without proper implementation, monitoring of the process and responsiveness at the local level, the wait could be eternal.

VII. CONCLUSION

Niger, a landlocked, northwest African country with several systemic barriers to development, has made education a national priority. In an effort to improve the national education system, Niger has implemented a decentralization program. This initiative is meant to increase access to quality education by building institutional capacity and achieving good governance criteria within the various levels of government—central, regional and local. With the support of international agencies such as the World Bank, Niger initiated a ten-year educational reform program, which created several deconcentrated offices in each of Niger's seven regions and decentralized entities, COGES, in many local schools. The town of Zermou is one village in the Zinder region of Niger, where one can examine the effects of these reforms firsthand.

For this study, I interviewed five individuals who play a significant role in Zermou's education system, in order to understand how this type of central government capacity-building initiative is perceived and translated into action by localities and why it is perceived and translated as such. Using the good governance concept to frame my analysis, I examined three key components: state capacity, accountability and responsiveness. This study is limited in its scope as it only involved five interviewees and investigated one school. Further research could examine the perceptions of local schools' governance actors in other subregions of Zinder as well as request input from regional government officials. Despite its limited scope, however, views expressed by interviewees and policy documents analyzed for this study reinforce each other, and highlight many common concerns when addressing good governance and decentralization initiatives. Moreover, many of the views expressed by interviewees were also expressed by other Nigeriens and Peace Corps volunteers from other parts of Niger that I met during my time in the country.

Responses to interview questions revealed that local Nigeriens deeply believe in the precepts of good governance, but they do not see their central or regional governments translating these precepts into action. As a result, Zermou's citizens perceive a degree of abandonment by central and regional government services and therefore feel a sense of powerlessness over their own circumstances. Interviewees attribute these poor conditions to government corruption, political allegiances interfering with proper management of government resources and the imposition of these decentralized reforms by international groups when Niger

is not capable or ready for such reforms. Localities have few resources and little capacity to implement education reforms themselves; they have little ability to hold central and regional governments accountable for their lack of responsiveness; and localities struggle to hold individual actors within the local education system (e.g., teachers) accountable and be responsive to the needs of the local schools. They even question government's and their own right to hold school staff accountable when these staff feel equally abandoned, if not more so, by government, their employer: they do not receive the resources or training support needed to do their jobs, and their salaries are insufficient and are often late, forcing them to leave their posts in search of more money to sustain themselves and their families.

Considering this sense of abandonment, interviewees said they perceived a decline in education quality resulting from the various education reforms introduced over the past two decades, a stark contrast from policy documents that say these reforms are building local capacity, encouraging participation and could even rely more on the local institutional structures such as the COGES. Interviews highlighted the divergence of perspectives between top tier government agencies and the local level. Policy documents indicated several achievements of the program. Meanwhile, citizens are saying they are not receiving the resources and administrative support they need and cannot manage their many community needs on their own. Moreover, local teachers are actually encouraged to compromise their own ethics and their student's wellbeing by prematurely advancing students a grade to improve program development indicators. This contradiction puts into question current implementation practices of monitoring and modernist-inspired development metrics that show success on paper when the reality is much different. To add another layer, interviewees blame international donors for much of this superficial reform implementation and yet praise INGOs for their work in the region, although both aid groups create a certain level of dependency.

Many of the concerns voiced in interviews reflected aspects and criticisms of good governance and decentralization found in the literatures. Niger is a classic case of modernist/neoliberal foundations in reform leading to superficial reform implementation and of neopatrimonial culture infecting governance systems. Despite decentralization rhetoric, Niger is still very top heavy in terms of governance with most decentralization being a deconcentration of central government authority to the regional level. If the national government were to go further, or at least provide sufficient support to its decentralized local structure—the COGES—it would

have to be a stronger advocate of decentralization by providing the needed resources and capacity-building training for such action to be truly effective. The need for more open participatory public space would also be necessary to encourage public participation and increase trust among all levels of government and citizens.

Although localities lack many of the resources necessary to improve local education, they also have the advantage of proximity and fewer levels of bureaucratic review, and as such, they may be more capable of offering participatory public space and building the trust necessary for improved collaborative governance. However, they would need to be empowered with the authority, responsibility, and provided the resources to do so. Given their limited resources and capacity, a strengthened governance network may be their strongest resource. Already, different community members have seen different needs in Zermou's primary school, and reacted to address those requirements. What would happen if those same citizens worked together? Strong community leaders, another community resource, may leverage their popularity and own trustworthiness to encourage this collaboration between different groups to build more trust and understanding of schools within communities. With the many constraints that exist in Niger, true change will come slowly and only with sustained diligence, a willingness to adapt to changing conditions and political contexts and hard work. Communities are not only hampered by lack of physical resources and support, but by ingrained cultural behavior, a sense of powerlessness due to current institutional barriers and mistrust of government institutions. These sentiments and behavior can only enervate with time, proof of school's effectiveness and benefits to citizens, as well as communication that instills a sense of shared-meaning among community members of how an education system should operate to improve the lives of its citizens.

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