



CSRS SCIENTIFIC SEMINAR N°16-11

Thursday, 15th September 2011 (Norbert Behi Lecture Hall, CSRS, Km 17 Adiopodoumé), 01 : 00 pm

Theme: From the top of my Alp: natural resource use under changing conditions. The case study from the Swiss Alps

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Abstract: African states are currently affected by waves of decentralization with governments passing new legislations to devolve the responsibility for managing natural resources to local communities. But despite growing awareness of the vital role of the commons in local livelihood systems, there is still some resistance to transferring full management of their use to the communities that depend upon them. Some policy makers are doubtful as to whether these areas can be properly managed by community-based organizations. Some of them are still influenced by the neo-Malthusian discourse of the 1960s on the “tragedy of the commons” recommending privatization and state control as the only means of preventing the degradation of resources held in common. The tendency in Africa is to the dismantling of commons and the emergence of private property or open access due to the coexistence of several overlapping and even contradictory institutional levels. However, the Swiss Alps (alpine pasture management) seem to be a case-against this general trend of the increasingly dismantled common property regime. In Switzerland, most alpine summer pastures are common property and have been managed by local governance systems for centuries for a good use of the scarce resources. A series of policies have been implemented in the Swiss Alps over the past 60 years that have sustained mobile pastoral systems. They have conferred tangible benefits on pastoralists, and have contributed significantly to conservation of biodiversity and to maintaining environmental quality. This success of the Swiss alpine system was questioned during the research project presented here whose aim was to address issues related to strategies initiated by alpine farmers under changing conditions. The study was conducted in summer 2011 and constituted a platform of exchange between a researcher from Africa, and actors of Swiss alpine agriculture in three cantons (Graubunden, Bern and Uri). It resulted from the study that in the Swiss alpine system, the institutional design is rooted into the local culture with the direct payments system (subsidiaries) as a strong incentive. This gives more flexibility to farmers to craft new rules and contribute to strengthen a multifunctional agricultural system which is ecologically friendly, socially acceptable and economically sustainable.

Keywords: Alpine pasture, Commons, Institutional change, Multifunctional agriculture, Switzerland

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