The story of
SOS Sahel UK

The journey from one international to four national NGOs

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Cover photo: SOS Sahel community tree planting project near Hawassa, Ethiopia in 2014. Credit: Aaron & Lisa via Flickr

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Introduction

This paper tells the story of SOS Sahel UK,[1] an international non-governmental organisation (INGO) registered in the UK in 1983 in response to the devastating drought and famine that impacted much of the Sahel in the early to mid-1970s. Despite these origins, SOS Sahel UK was set up as a development rather than a humanitarian non-governmental organisation (NGO) and focused on natural resource management (NRM) in the drylands of the Sahel (see Box 1).

The hallmark of SOS Sahel UK's work has been its long-term, participatory and locally owned approach to development. Much development work in the Sahel and elsewhere has been dominated by a short-term, projectised approach; however, SOS Sahel UK became known for its long-term support and accompaniment to particular communities and geographic areas. This paper describes how its approach to community-based NRM evolved through the 1980s and 1990s across four countries: Sudan, Ethiopia, Mali and Niger.[2] The paper also describes the pan-Sahelian aspect to SOS Sahel UK's work, straddling East and West Africa, and its policy-level engagement with national governments. This part of the story – Chapter 1 – is relevant to current debates about development in the Sahel, particularly around governance and peacebuilding over natural resources, issues often discussed today under the banner of the humanitarian–development–peace nexus.

In early 2020, 36 years after it was created, SOS Sahel UK took the decision to close its doors. The reason? It felt it had worked itself out of a job, as its four main country programmes became fully functioning national NGOs, embedded in national civil society. The second part of the story – Chapters 2–5 – is about SOS Sahel UK's pursuit of an agenda of localisation, long before the term had become common currency. Starting as a Global North-headquartered INGO, by the late 1990s it was exploring how to devolve management and control to its respective country programmes. The process of decentralisation, familiar to many international agencies, was urgently accelerated when SOS Sahel UK hit a financial crisis in the early 2000s. This triggered its transformation from a UK-headquartered INGO running country programmes to a family of national NGOs supported and facilitated from the UK, accompanied by a significant shift in the balance of power. This happened at varying speeds in different countries,[3] but having completed the process by 2019/2020, SOS Sahel UK decided to close, and to share this story of localisation.

SOS Sahel's experience differs from many INGOs' approach to localisation. It is about the wholescale transfer of power, resources and assets to national NGOs rooted in civil society in their respective countries, so that the Northern-headquartered organisation is no longer needed. This is highly relevant to current debates about decolonising the aid sector and offers valuable learning. How did four thriving national NGOs emerge out of an international one? This paper describes and analyses SOS Sahel UK's journey, the challenges it faced and some of the mistakes it made, as well as the factors contributing to success.

1   Although the name 'SOS Sahel UK' became 'SOS Sahel International UK' at a later date, for brevity this publication uses 'SOS Sahel UK' throughout.

This paper also reviews the experience of the four country programmes after they became national NGOs. What were the advantages? What are the challenges they have faced and what does this tell us about how aspects of the current development model are working?

The paper draws on the large archive of reports, evaluations and other materials held by SOS Sahel UK,[4] and on more than 30 interviews with stakeholders of SOS Sahel UK (current and former staff and trustees; staff and trustees of the national NGOs SOS Sahel UK created; and a number of close observers of SOS Sahel UK's journey, some of whom have also been partners). It does not mention all of SOS Sahel's projects, but instead focuses on a sample of some of its longest-running ones that capture and illustrate the trajectory and history of SOS Sahel as an INGO.

Box 1   Brief history of the origins of SOS Sahel UK

In 1976, following several consecutive years of drought and famine, SOS Sahel International was founded in Dakar, Senegal under the initiative of Léopold Sédar Senghor, then the President of Senegal, with the support of other Sahelian governments. The aim was to raise funds from public and private sources, particularly in Europe, to support development projects mainly focused on natural resources, including afforestation, well-digging and water management. European committees were set up in France, Belgium, Germany, Luxembourg and, in 1982, in the UK. The British Committee became operational in 1984 and legally registered as an NGO with charitable status in the UK in 1987, under the Presidency of Baroness Ewart-Biggs. SOS Sahel France, SOS Sahel Belgium and SOS Sahel Luxembourg also became INGOs, but SOS Sahel Belgium ceased to exist and the committee in Germany ceased to function some years ago. A focus on NRM remained the common theme of the three remaining European-headquartered SOS Sahel NGOs.

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4   The archive has now been passed onto the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS).

Setting the scene

Drought and famine impacted much of the Sahel in the mid-1980s. This triggered a large-scale and high-profile international emergency response. In the aftermath the focus shifted to development as substantial amounts of funding continued to be made available for rehabilitation and recovery across the Sahelian belt. However, the international image of the Sahel as a uniformly drought-stricken, barren landscape characterised by low productivity persisted throughout the 1980s and 1990s. These drylands were seen as having little potential, while being economically inefficient and environmentally destructive. Investment was not considered worthwhile except for large-scale irrigation and mechanised farming schemes. During this period, Sahelian countries were of little international, geopolitical, strategic interest.

At national level, governments tended towards policies that imposed formal state control over natural resources. In this model the state owned and managed forest reserves, often accompanied by punitive regulatory regimes that prioritised conservation and reforestation over local engagement and access. Long-standing customary mechanisms for NRM in Sahelian countries were at best ignored, at worst not recognised or abolished, thus devaluing and weakening those traditional institutions and processes.[5] This was exacerbated in the case of pastoralism. Common property regimes, in which natural resources are owned, managed and/or used collectively by several users, underpin Sahelian pastoralist systems of production. Yet these were poorly understood and their significance, for example in terms of facilitating equitable access to natural resources and sustaining local peace, were underestimated.[6]

From the mid-1990s, many Sahelian countries moved towards more decentralised forms of government, driven by wider political change as military or single-party governments gave way to some form of multi-party democracy. This also opened up the space for civil society. Combined, this created opportunities for more devolved approaches to NRM, which were better suited to accommodate local interests and empower local communities. NGOs like SOS Sahel UK were able to step into this space to foster and support more participatory approaches.

Fast forward to the 21st century and the context has changed substantially again. The Sahel's natural resources are now accorded much greater value, whether land or minerals such as gold and oil. Indeed, this has triggered many instances of violent conflict within Sahelian countries as groups and local leaders vie for control over those resources.

It is against this backdrop that we chart SOS Sahel's progress, first as an INGO and then as four national NGOs.

Chapter 1   SOS Sahel's approach to natural resource management and development in the drylands

1.1 The origins of SOS Sahel UK's approach to development: Shendi, Sudan

NRM has been at the heart of SOS Sahel UK's development mission from the beginning. The original motivation was 'rolling back' the Sahara Desert, which was believed to be advancing at a great rate.[7] SOS Sahel UK's first project in 1983 was an afforestation village extension scheme in Shendi, on the Nile flood plain in Nile Province, Sudan. Implemented in collaboration with the INGO Green Deserts, the project's aim was 'to counteract desertification and ameliorate conditions in the village without introducing over-sophisticated machinery or techniques, while increasing village autonomy and reducing dependence on outside agencies'.[8] This was to be achieved primarily through establishing tree nurseries and woodlots and planting windbreaks.

Described as 'a big experiment' by the first international project manager,[9] the Shendi project laid the foundation for SOS Sahel UK's approach to development, which, in the 1980s was still a novel idea. Box 2 describes some of the project's distinctive features.

On the back of the community forestry approach piloted by the Shendi project, SOS Sahel UK launched a ten-year Community Forestry project in Northern Province of Sudan, from 1988 to 1998, focused on Ed Debba.[10] Drawing on indigenous solutions, the project developed and supported a substantial community-based programme of sand stabilisation. It was recognised by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) as an African success story in controlling land degradation and desertification.

Box 2   Distinctive features of the Shendi Village Extension Scheme, Sudan

- The project originated from a request by the *Umdah* (local leader) of Seyal for assistance against desert encroachment among the villages of the Seyal Agricultural Scheme. When his formal requests for government support failed, he turned to the NGO community.
- Once the project had begun, it was up to villagers to approach SOS Sahel to request support.
- Women were centrally involved in creating home-based tree nurseries, which became a source of income generation, and in tree planting. They were supported by female extension workers.
- Involving and raising awareness among school children was another key component.
- Puppet theatre was introduced: an innovative and highly successful means of communication for educational and extension purposes.
- Community participation and engagement in management of the project activities evolved and deepened over time. In Phase One, villagers selected the forest activities in which they were interested and contributed their labour voluntarily, while the project staff supervised activities. In Phase Two, management of activities was transferred to the community. In Phase Three, villagers assumed decision-making and management control.
- Local government was involved from the outset, particularly technical forest officers with whom SOS Sahel partnered closely. Foresters were seconded from the National Forest Service to recruit and train local extension agents.

1.2 From one to four country programmes

Building on the Sudan experience and learning about community-based NRM, SOS Sahel UK decided to take its development approach further afield. In 1988/1989 it established the Koisha Rural Development Project in Wolaita in the Southern Region of Ethiopia. Although the project included NRM, it adopted a more multi-sectoral, area-based approach to development compared with the Sudan projects. Then, in 1989, SOS Sahel UK began working in Mali, starting with a more technical focus on soil and water conservation in the Tominian Community Environment Project in eastern Mali. But, as with the Shendi project, the approach evolved and community participation and management deepened over time. In 1990, SOS Sahel UK launched an agro-forestry project in Niger. This, too, evolved into a more participatory approach to community forest management.

SOS Sahel UK's approach had thus moved on from 'holding back the desert' to harnessing the potential of the drylands. Although some of the environmental and development challenges share similarities across the Sahel ecosystem, the political and governance contexts vary considerably between countries, especially between East Africa and francophone West Africa. This was reflected in the slightly different directions SOS Sahel UK's programmes took in each country. But the same mindset and core set of values underpinned its work in each of the four countries, creating a distinctive approach.

1.3 How SOS Sahel UK grew

Before exploring the common characteristics of SOS Sahel UK's approach, it is worth exploring the 'how' of the geographical expansion of its work. Many of those involved in SOS Sahel UK's early years acknowledge the unconventional and non-prescriptive approach the organisation adopted. It was mainly driven by the people it recruited, who were given considerable scope to identify opportunities for community-based NRM and new projects in the country to which they were assigned. In the 1980s and 1990s these recruits were mostly expatriates who shared a deep commitment to, and belief in, grassroots development; who chose to live in rural areas and spend time in local communities; and who had a high level of technical expertise, often in forest management. They, in turn, recruited local staff rooted in community-based development.

Those interviewed for this publication who were associated with the first 15 years of SOS Sahel UK's existence talk positively about the flexibility of approach and lack of dogma. Those in management at the time acknowledge that not everyone was comfortable with that level of flexibility; therefore, the organisation sought out and recruited staff who *were* comfortable and indeed relished the space and opportunities they were given. This somewhat organic approach to development was possible because of the plentiful funding available for NGOs in the late 1980s and 1990s, which was also accessible to small and medium-sized NGOs. Institutional funding channels were still heavily centralised with most donor decision-making taking place in capital cities. But this was an era where broad objectives, a clear geographic focus and project logic was enough for donors. While staff at country level identified development needs and project opportunities, the London headquarters of SOS Sahel UK wrote project proposals and secured funding, with considerable flexibility in this pre-logframe era. This gave staff at country and project level even more scope to focus on dialogue and consultation locally.

1.4 Community-oriented and highly participatory

Local people were seen as critical stakeholders and agents of change.[11] In 1989/1990, SOS Sahel UK embarked upon the Sahel Oral History project,[12] the first of its kind. The aim was not only to record indigenous knowledge about traditional land-use practice, farming and pastoral systems and environmental change, but also to develop a practical approach that could be incorporated into project planning and methodology. It set the tone for SOS Sahel UK's project relationships: staff were encouraged to listen and engage in dialogue as facilitators, rather than prescribe solutions. This quickly became the unifying theme across all SOS Sahel's projects and programmes: a kind of moral compass that guided its work then and has continued to do so.

However, this was not always straightforward, and there was much trial and error at project level. Evaluations commissioned by SOS Sahel UK played an important role in critiquing the extent and effectiveness of community participation in its projects. There appears to have been a pattern

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11   Personal communication with Judith Sandford.
12   Cross, N. and Barker, R. (eds) (1992) *At the desert's edge: oral histories from the Sahel*. London: Panos

across a number of projects whereby 'community participation' was initially conceived of as the provision of labour, sometimes paid. Prompted by the critique of independent evaluations and as the project became more embedded, participation usually became more meaningful over time and the vision of communities as partners and agents of change more likely to be realised. A 1993 evaluation of the Ed Debba community forestry project shows how the mindset among project staff had evolved, to the point where farmers were recognised for knowing as much as staff. Farmers were directly involved in creating successful technical solutions, marking a step beyond participation to a more genuine form of partnership.

The nature of participation and the tools to support it varied between contexts. In Ethiopia, for example, a legacy of the Dergue regime was a high level of suspicion and distrust within the population. In response, the strategy for participation in the Koisha Rural Development Project was to engage interested farmers rather than whole communities. Farmers were involved as researchers in trials of new seed varieties and agricultural techniques and played a key role in an external mid-term evaluation in 1994.[13] The Tominian project in Mali experimented with theatre as a medium to explore and communicate issues affecting local communities. This also threw light on intra-community dynamics and on occasions provided an impromptu evaluation of the project's work.[14] For example, there were repeated references to the pitfalls of collective work in communities that were deeply fissured, triggering reflection within the Tominian project about whether it was more appropriate to work with interested farmers rather than with whole communities.

SOS Sahel UK's commitment to community participation was clear and consistent. But it was not done uncritically. For three years, in the early 1990s, SOS Sahel UK ran a participatory evaluation project exploring how to involve communities in the evaluation of development projects. This also included a review of each project's participatory approach, taking a hard look at how a number of SOS Sahel's projects were performing in this respect, in terms of ownership and power dynamics.[15] An important finding was that projects with detailed, predefined objectives and programmes of activities were more likely to interpret participation as mobilisation of the workforce. But where objectives were more generally defined at the outset, there was more flexibility to include local people in planning activities and the potential for greater local participation in decision-making.

1.5 From natural resource management with settled communities, to natural resource management involving multiple actors

There was a tendency in many SOS Sahel UK projects, especially early on, to focus almost exclusively on settled communities. But as the organisation became more deeply involved in

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13 This was done in collaboration with Farm Africa's Farmers' Participatory Research Project.

14 Mavro, A. (1991) *Development theatre – a way to listen. Report on the Development Theatre Programme. Community environment project, Tominian, Mali. April 1989–June 1991*.

15 Martin, P. and Quinney, S. (1995) *Participatory evaluation project. SOS Sahel/UNSO. Final report*.

NRM, the need to work with other users of the same natural resource base, usually pastoralists and agro-pastoralists, became apparent. This shift to support shared management of natural resources took shape in the late 1990s, principally in Sudan, Mali and Niger.

The El Ain Natural Forest Management Project in North Kordofan, Sudan was a classic example. By the late 1990s it became apparent to SOS Sahel staff that the exclusion of pastoralists was threatening the project's achievements and exacerbating tensions between pastoralists and the settled farmers with whom the project was working. Pastoralists had been regarded as part of the problem rather than part of a solution, and there was fear and mistrust among project staff about how to engage with pastoralist groups; this required the project to engage in conflict management. With the support of the INGO Responding to Conflict, project staff undertook training in conflict analysis and resolution, together with members of the community, government and civil society groups who traditionally dealt with conflict situations. Choosing an area that the project knew well, an approach to conflict management was piloted.[16]

Around the same time, a self-evaluation of the Bankass project in Mali in 1999 reached a similar conclusion. Working closely with sedentary agro-pastoralists and residents, they had taken little account of transhumant pastoralists. Women had also been excluded from the project's activities. Reasons for this and the bias built into the project from the outset included: the structural marginalisation of certain actors such as transhumant pastoralists and women; the inability of customary institutions to take account of the interests of all stakeholders in managing common resources; and the fact that the project had not developed an appropriate approach to generate understanding and support for shared management among the resident population, nor recognised the need to make existing structures more representative. As a consequence, local NRM rules were ignored by non-residents and conflict over the use of natural resources was worsening.[17] The project was reoriented in its second phase to rectify this, engaging herders and women in decision-making about NRM.

In contrast, the Takieta Joint Forest Management Project that began in 1995 in Niger engaged all user groups from the outset, including both agriculturalists and pastoralists. The project invested heavily in a process of dialogue over at least 18 months, setting up systems for different groups to talk to each other and air their disagreements. There followed a series of inclusive workshops to reach agreement and create a local management structure for the Takieta Forest Reserve. Criticism that the process had taken too long was rebuffed: members of the local management structure were of the view that the time and effort spent repeatedly consulting and negotiating with users to

16   Egeimi, O., Mahmood, M.A. and Abdella, A.M. (2003) *Towards a local peace: SOS Sahel's experience of conflict transformation between pastoralists and farmers at El Ain, North Kordofan State, Sudan*. Securing the Commons No.5. London: IIED (https://pubs.iied.org/9252iied).

17   Bocoum, A., Cochrane, K., Diakite, M. and Kane, O. (2003) *Social inclusion: a pre-requisite for equitable and sustainable natural resource management. Two experiences in Mali*. Securing the Commons No.7. London: IIED (https://pubs.iied.org/9252iied).

agree on the management structure were necessary to secure popular support and legitimacy. The project team emphasised that local management of natural resources is primarily a social rather than a technical challenge.[18]

In all countries where SOS Sahel UK was working, this more inclusive, multi-actor approach was supported, deepened and recorded by one of SOS Sahel UK's most important and influential action research projects: the 'Shared Management of Common Property Resources' (SMCPR).

1.6 Building and supporting local institutions for the shared management of natural resources

Over time, SOS Sahel UK paid increasing attention to developing local institutions, usually at community level and with a mandate to manage natural resources. In SOS Sahel's first project in Mali, the Tominian Community Environment Project, the approach evolved from a focus on individuals in the first phase to establishing and strengthening local institutions to manage natural resources in the second phase. This included establishing and legally registering supravillage associations as Farmer Cooperatives. The Bankass Environmental Protection Project adopted a slightly different approach, revitalising and strengthening existing customary institutions for NRM: the *alamodiou*, customary guardians of the forest and of trees on agricultural land in Dogon society, transferring skills and establishing local rules for managing natural resources. Particularly through the latter project, SOS Sahel UK and subsequently Sahel Eco have been regarded as leaders in identifying an indigenous movement for reforestation.[19]

By the end of the 1990s, SOS Sahel UK's commitment to identifying, nurturing and strengthening local institutions was evident across all four country programmes. Its approach to doing so varied appropriately from one context to another. But it was building experience, supported by the SMCPR programme, to reflect, learn, adapt and document its work, including both challenges and successes.

At the same time, SOS Sahel UK worked closely with government. Indeed, this was a hallmark of all its projects from the early days of the Shendi project. This usually took the form of close collaboration with the local forestry department and local authorities, while also building relationships with the respective forestry department at national level. This was not simply a relationship of compliance. It was a close working relationship, founded on technical collaboration and exchange, which carried government officers with the project as its approach evolved, through trial and error, exploring and establishing new ways of working, particularly community-based NRM.

In each of the four countries SOS Sahel UK seized the window of opportunity created by changing government policy on decentralisation, promoting and demonstrating what this could mean for community-based NRM. In Sudan, the El Ain project effectively realised the provisions of the 1989 Forestry Act whereby local communities were legally recognised as owners and controllers of the land. The project successfully registered community forests in the names of local committees

from 14 participating villages. External evaluators in 2000 described this as 'a highly significant breakthrough in the context of natural resource management in Sudan',[20] the only example of its kind in the country at that time. In 2004, the Water Corporation of North Kordofan State passed a new law stating that the management of *hafirs* (artificially constructed pools of water fed from seasonal water courses) would now come under its jurisdiction. When the local management committee, supported and informed of their rights by SOS Sahel UK, refused to pay the levies being demanded of them, the case was taken to court, which ruled in favour of the village. SOS Sahel UK subsequently brought together representatives from the Water Corporation, the judiciary and civil society organisations, among others, to discuss the issue. This resulted in a change in the North Kordofan State Water Act, legally recognising community management of their water source.[21]

In Niger in 1995 the government invited SOS Sahel UK to establish a project to explore how the forest could be successfully managed by the people who use it, in line with the government's commitment to decentralisation. The Takieta Joint Forest Management Project demonstrated how this was possible, setting up the Kou Tayani Association representing an estimated 10,000 forest users. It sustainably produced fuelwood, grew seedlings in village nurseries and paid salaries to woodcutters – within three years the work of the Association was outperforming the work of the previous 50 years.[22] By closely engaging the Forestry Department, a change in attitude was triggered within government about community management of natural resources. It also changed forest law in 2004 in terms of people's rights towards forestry resources,[23] opening the door for many new initiatives, which continue to this day.

As a consequence of its approach and close working relationship with government, SOS Sahel UK was uniquely placed to facilitate the bringing together of customary and statutory institutions and systems. The Borana Collaborative Forest Management Project, established in 1999/2000 in southern Ethiopia, demonstrates this well. In a context where pastoralism was poorly understood and customary management systems had been undermined by policy (for example placing pastoral common lands under state ownership, which failed to control resource exploitation by other users), the project developed a new collaborative system of management. This combined the customary institutions of the Borana Oromo, the *Gadaa*, and the modern institution of the Peasant Association, part of Ethiopia's decentralised system of governance, into a new common property management system. Both institutions became legitimate right-holders over the forest, co-managing it, with the traditional structure playing a lead role and the Peasant Association a supportive role. Customary institutions were modernised in the process.

Two key reflections emerged. First, that multiple stakeholder resource projects take time to implement if they are to produce enduring positive results, a factor that is rarely compatible with

20   *El Ain Natural Forest Management Project, 1989 to 2001. End evaluation report*, 2000.
21   See: *Haramata* 48, July 2005 (https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/12515IIED.pdf).
22   See SOS Sahel International UK Annual Review 2004/2005 (https://digital.soas.ac.uk/content/AA/00/00/16/97/00001/AA00001697_00001.pdf).
23   Niger Forest Law: 2004-040 of 8 June 2004. Titre III : Gestion des Forêts, Chapitre 1 : Principes de Gestion.

short-term donor timeframes. Second, decisions about the shape of the new system must always remain with stakeholders; the role of the external development actor is to facilitate a process of negotiation among those stakeholders.[24] Once again, SOS Sahel UK took advantage of emerging local-level 'space' as a result of government policy to regionalise and decentralise.

As some interviewees have observed, the combination of strengthening local institutions while working closely with key government actors over a period of time enabled SOS Sahel UK to have an impact at local level *and* to influence government policy to a much greater extent than is possible when INGOs set out to work as independently of government as possible. SOS Sahel UK's influence was two-fold. First, it experimented with and demonstrated a model for community-based NRM in-country. In Sudan, for example, the El Ain model of community forest management was replicated and considerably scaled up by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and the Forestry National Corporation in the Butana Integrated Rural Development Project. By 2017, records show there were 26 gazetted community forests in North Kordofan – 12 more than when the project had ended.[25] Second, SOS Sahel UK influenced national-level government policy, a good example being its experience in Mali (see Box 3). In this case, SOS Sahel UK was a founding member of a collective effort.

A central theme in SOS Sahel UK's policy influencing work has been building a more positive relationship between the state and local people around NRM; in other words, influencing the social contract between state and citizen. This was possible because of the relationships and trust that SOS Sahel UK had built up over time, not just with local communities and users of natural resources, but also with government at local and national levels.

24 Tache, B., and Irwin, B. (2003) *Traditional institutions, multiple stakeholders and modern perspectives in common property. Accompanying change with Borana pastoral systems*. Securing the commons No. 4 (https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/9238IIED.pdf).

25 UNEP (2020) *Lessons learned and good practices in natural resource management* (https://postconflict. unep.ch/Sudan/NRM_2020_EN.pdf).

Box 3   SOS Sahel UK influencing government policy in Mali, as part of an NGO network

With two other NGOs, SOS Sahel UK formed the GDRN5 Network (the Network for Decentralised Management of Natural Resources in the 5th Region of Mali) in 1994. By 2003, the GDRN5 had grown to a membership of 24 international and national NGOs and associations.

In the late 1990s, the network decided to become involved in lobbying and advocacy at the local level to address the shortcomings of legislation on NRM, and also to influence the behavior of local forestry agents by highlighting the problems and contradictions between NRM legislation and local practices. These included arrangements allowing local people to harvest and use wood, and the role of community organisations in monitoring, policing and managing forests. The forestry service saw NGOs as challenging their authority, which made collaboration difficult.

Through a facilitated process bringing together government officers, local communities, civil society organisations and eventually members of parliament (MPs), ways to address the disparities and contradictions between legislation and local practice were found. Relationships between local people, the local forestry services and NGOs improved considerably.

Having developed confidence in its ability to influence policy and legislation, the Network subsequently engaged at national level to influence the formulation of legislation on the Pastoral Charter. For the first time this would legally recognise pastoralism as an active and positive form of land use. Although intervening at a late stage in the legislative process, the Network influenced the adoption of certain amendments through the facilitation of a number of workshops bringing civil society organisations, MPs and technical services together. Exceptionally, the GRDN5 Network was officially invited by the authorities in Mopti to assist in formulating a draft enforcement order for implementing the Pastoral Charter.

Source: Konaté, A.B. (2003) *Local networks as a tool for influencing policy: experiences of the GDRN5 Network in Mali*. Securing the Commons No.6. London: IIED (https://pubs.iied.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/migrate/9254IIED.pdf).

1.7 The role of action research

Much of what has been described above was possible because of SOS Sahel UK's commitment to action research. This was part of SOS Sahel UK's way of working from the beginning under its first director, Nigel Cross, who launched the innovative oral history project. The organisation's way of doing action research was key. It had a strong track record of identifying critical issues from its programmatic work and developing action research projects around these. Action research became a part of the project, facilitating learning by project staff and feeding into 'doing things better'. At its most influential, SOS Sahel UK's action research work had a strong policy component.

A number of individual projects contained a research component and sometimes the action research addressed a theme beyond the project level. In Ethiopia, for example, the country programme launched a Gender and Pastoralism Action Research Project in 2005, in collaboration with Oxfam GB and Farm Africa. At a time when there was growing interest in the development of pastoral areas in Ethiopia, the project's objective was to initiate more community-led processes of development and environmental management, engaging all sections of pastoralist societies through better understanding gender relations within those societies.

When the action research was rooted in SOS Sahel UK's programme experience, yet pan-Sahelian, it played a particularly important and niche role, straddling the East/West Africa, anglophone/ francophone divide, bringing together staff from different country offices. Although this required a commitment to work in two languages, it was key to cross-country exchange and learning. An early example was a research programme launched in the early 1990s in collaboration with IFAD, which explored the effects of male out-migration on women's management of the natural resource base in the Sahel, in two countries where SOS Sahel UK worked (Sudan and Mali) and two others (Senegal and Burkina Faso). The findings threw light on household dynamics and how to better engage women in NRM projects. A three-year research project reviewing SOS Sahel UK's programming experience with forest management was published as a book: *Local forest management: towards a new social contract*.[26]

SOS Sahel UK's more well-known and probably most influential action research programme was SMCPR. When reviewing the organisation's work on participatory forest management across the four countries, it became apparent they all faced similar challenges in engaging mobile pastoralists who were effectively excluded from NRM arrangements in one project after another and were widely perceived as a source of conflict. SOS Sahel UK approached the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED's) Drylands Programme and a highly effective partnership ensued. This brought together SOS Sahel UK's operational expertise with IIED's research and publications expertise, its well-established work on pastoralism and its strategic longer-term focus.[27] The programme's goal was to create the conditions for equitable, sustainable

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27   The project was funded by Comic Relief, the then UK Department for International Development (DFID) and Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation (Norad).

and decentralised management of common property resources in the Sahel. Of particular concern was how to ensure mobile groups such as herders, whose livelihoods depend on periodic access to natural resources, played an active role in their management.[28]

The programme is widely credited with advancing the thinking and practice of the staff and projects of SOS Sahel UK. The final evaluation of the programme found it had significantly impacted partners' capacities, including their knowledge and understanding of pastoral systems and land-use dynamics. All partners had implemented multi-stakeholder processes to identify institutional arrangements for more equitable management of common property resources. The programme supported them in influencing national and local policy on NRM, particularly on local agreements – *conventions locales* in West Africa – that fostered positive relationships around NRM between the state and its people through local institutions. The programme also impacted wider thinking on common property resource management and participatory forest management.[29] Described as 'seminal' by IIED researchers, SMCPR planted the seed for some of their subsequent long-term action research projects, including 'making decentralisation work' and a programme on devolved climate finance.

Box 4 captures key features of the SMCPR programme.

28   See: SOS Sahel and IIED (2002) *Shared management of common property resources in the Sahel: a regional action-research programme. 1999–2002 final report*. Reaching this aim was itself a learning process. The original idea was a programme to support pastoralists to counter the negative impacts of existing projects on pastoralist access to natural resources. This evolved into a programme bringing the different user groups together, realising a more appropriate approach was one that facilitated those groups resolving contentious access to natural resources themselves.
29   See for example: Alden Wiley, L. (2002) *Participatory forest management in Africa: an overview of progress and issues*. Rome: FAO (www.fao.org/3/Y4807B/Y4807B03.pdf).

Box 4   Key features of the Shared Management of Common Property Resources (SMCPR) programme

- The programme began with a feasibility study and a workshop bringing all SOS Sahel country programmes together for the first time.
- Although the overall programme aim and objectives were clearly articulated from the outset, the case was successfully made to donors to allow project plans to emerge for years 2 and 3, based on community consultations in year 1.
- The programme adopted a process-led rather than single-model approach to common property resource management, recognising the different contexts, types of organisations and schools of thought and development associated with different countries.
- SMCPR provided a programme of training to project staff as well as government officials, traditional leaders and community representatives, with a particular focus on pastoralist production systems to address the widespread issue that pastoralist land-use systems were poorly understood.
- Subsequent training was tailored and responsive to different countries and partners, with follow-up support activities where possible.
- The 'Securing the Commons' series, published by IIED in English and French, captured and validated the experience of project staff participating in SMCPR, and has provided a lasting record of the processes and institutional arrangements the programme fostered.

Source: Alden Wiley, 2002

1.8 The sustainability challenge

While many of SOS Sahel UK's projects made a major contribution to more peaceful and shared management of natural resources, the challenge was sustaining this after the projects ended. This was a theme running through many project evaluations. Concerns ranged from sustaining processes that brought stakeholders together and managed conflict, to sustaining local institutions responsible for NRM. A number of follow-up studies have been carried out some years after SOS Sahel UK projects ended, to explore their longer-term impact, most recently by the Drylands Programme of IIED.[30] The results are mixed.

On the positive side, a number of community institutions set up and fostered by SOS Sahel UK projects have proved to be remarkably resilient. Five or six years after the Meket project[31] closed in Ethiopia, a group of former staff returned to investigate what had happened since. Like many SOS Sahel UK projects, the Meket project had made big efforts to work with both government and local communities. Although the work with government had disappeared, the community structures were still functioning. Plans produced during the project's lifetime had lasted for five years or

more, including a community tourism project supported by a travel company operating out of Addis Ababa.[32] In Niger, in 2019, the community institutions for running five silvo-pastoralist sites (combining livestock production and forestry outside the classified forest area) in the Zinder area were still functioning many years after they had been set up. Although not as strong as when the project was running, they enjoyed the support of local chiefs who had initially been among the most skeptical stakeholders.[33] These institutions were regarded as a model that other NRM development projects could learn from.

Similarly, in El Ain, Sudan, the community-level structures for forest management continued. In 2014, 13 years after the project had ended, an impact study was carried out by UNEP, SOS Sahel UK and the Forests National Corporation (FNC).[34] This showed that communities still had legal documents that proved their ownership of their community forests and there were still functioning committees with varied means of protecting their forest resource, ranging from villagers taking direct responsibility to the appointment of a forest guard by the community.

> It demonstrated convincingly that community forests were safe from expropriation by powerful outsiders and they provided a continuing flow of benefits. However, many forests were under pressure of local population increase and from livestock pressure exerted by pastoralists.[35,36]

However, at government level not all FNC staff were aware that a forest could be gazetted by a community under the 1986 Forest Act. This posed another potential threat and highlighted the need for further awareness-raising at government level.

A common pattern has emerged of the resilience of structures and institutions for NRM at community level. Many still exist long after the project supporting them has ended, although they are usually meeting less regularly and with less power, authority and effectiveness. IIED's work in 2019/2020, following up the SMCPR case studies, found that only one of the institutions created – Kou Tayani in Niger – had a financially viable model that allowed for continuous replenishment of funds from the regular licensing and sales of wood and honey. Others were weakened when project funding ended, for example the traditional management structures in the Borana Forest Management Project in Ethiopia, which were not adequately recognised by state and federal administrations.[37]

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32   Tourism in Ethiopia for Sustainable Future Alternatives (TESFA) (www.tesfatours.com/about/).
33   Personal communication with Kees Vogt.
34   UNEP, FNC and SOS Sahel (2015) *Community natural resource management and farm forestry: twenty-five years of experience in Kordofan and Darfur*.
35   UNEP (2020: 34).
36   IIED's follow-up study in 2020 showed that areas of forest land that had not been registered as community-owned had all but disappeared, indicating community ownership did offer some protection. See: IIED (2020) *How have decentralized natural resource management institutions evolved over 20 years? Summary of findings from Mali, Niger, Sudan and Ethiopia*. Working Paper. London: IIED.
37   IIED (2020).

IIED's follow-up study,[38] more than 15 years after SMCPR ended, highlights the challenge for local institutions to navigate and adapt to a fast-changing and complex political and economic environment. As described above, increasing human and livestock populations have intensified pressure on natural resources and on local institutions to manage them. In some areas – for instance, parts of Bankass District in Mali – insecurity and civil conflict have spilled over into deteriorating relationships between herders and settled people to the point where there are very limited opportunities for different groups to come together. Despite a changing policy context in the 1990s that appeared to create space for participatory management systems across the Sahel, in many countries the actions of the state have also posed a threat to community-managed natural resources, for example making large-scale land allocations to 'investors' or others seeking land, often without any local consultation. Cash-strapped forest departments have continued to see forests as a source of income, at odds with participatory management systems. And as described above in the case of Sudan, changes in the law have not always followed through into changes in behaviour among those responsible for implementation of that law, including government officials and judges.

On the one hand, these findings highlight the limitations of a finite project approach and the need for ongoing inputs and support to sustain the institutional software that a project may have put in place, particularly to navigate larger forces of change. On the other hand, the fact that community institutions have continued to exist and to function long after SOS Sahel UK projects have ended, albeit with reduced capacity, is encouraging. An early draft of a recent lessons-learned report from Sudan concluded that:

> What counts is that government and projects work together to improve [governance frameworks and policies]. Reform of institutions, policies and governance requires profound changes. They can never be achieved by single projects working in isolation; intensive, long-term collaboration between government supported by projects is the best way forward.[39]

In many ways this captures the philosophy underpinning SOS Sahel UK's development approach. But as a relatively small INGO it had limited capacity for the kind of intensive, long-term collaboration with government that is required. This is where collaboration between an NGO like SOS Sahel UK and a larger organisation like UNEP, which has greater influence at national level, is key, once again sustained over time.

1.9 A distinctive approach?

Much of what is described above as SOS Sahel UK's approach to development is similar to what most INGOs aspire to: a participatory, community-based approach, with the intention of influencing government policy in the agency's particular area of expertise. Yet in interviews with

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38   IIED (2020).
39   Kerkhof (2017), cited in an early draft for UNEP (2020) 'Lessons learned and good practices in natural resource management' (https://postconflict.unep.ch/Sudan/NRM_2020_EN.pdf).

stakeholders of SOS Sahel UK, both internal and external, there is a sense of something distinctive about the organisation. External commentators talked about the genuineness of its commitment to working with local communities, to being process-led rather than results-driven, building on what communities actually do. The fact that it took time to get to know and to build relationships with communities was key. SOS Sahel UK made a strategic choice to remain small and specialised throughout the 1990s. This was highly unusual within the NGO sector, where growth in funding and geographical coverage was often the objective. However, the organisation's decision not to continue expanding geographically was seen as evidence of its commitment to do in-depth work in a limited number of countries in the Sahel, and of the value it attached to a deep understanding of in-country dynamics and to effecting change through building relationships, credibility and trust.

Many staff who have worked for SOS Sahel UK, both at the headquarters level and in-country at project level, describe its distinctive working culture. It was striking how often the word 'family' came up in interviews for this paper, and the combination of respect and affection they expressed for SOS Sahel UK. It was seen by its staff as an organisation that really lived by its values. In a sector in which staff turnover is typically high, a feature of SOS Sahel UK was the length of service of many of its staff members. In the early 2000s, 15 of SOS Sahel UK's most senior staff in Africa averaged more than six years of working with the organisation. At a workshop in 2005, SOS Sahel's longest-serving staff were asked what had kept them going through a turbulent few years. Some of the answers were illuminating: 'personal conviction' and 'all the freedom to do what you want'.

Chapter 2 The process of transformation and localisation

2.1 The imperative to transform

By the latter half of the 1990s the need for change in SOS Sahel UK's organisational and business model had become apparent. First and foremost, the momentum to decentralise from the UK-based headquarters to country programmes was building. This was a general trend in the sector. Within SOS Sahel UK there was growing pressure to move programme management functions out of London amid some management tension between headquarters and the field, similar to many INGOs. But funding pressure was also building. Despite a lean management structure in the UK, by the end of the 1990s the funding context had changed; it was becoming increasingly difficult for small and medium-sized NGOs to raise core funds for overheads. Until this point, SOS Sahel UK had, in effect, relied upon organisations such as Band Aid and Comic Relief to raise private unrestricted funds for this purpose. These options disappeared as they developed their own funding strategies, at the same time as the Block Grant provided by the European Union (EU) to European NGOs came to an end.

In 1999, SOS Sahel UK commissioned three experts on the NGO sector to provide an analysis and recommendations on how to decentralise.[40] Their report captured the sense that what had been the organisation's strength was now becoming its Achilles' heel:

> SOS Sahel's ethos has been vested in this core group [of expatriate consultants or advisers with strong ideas about what constitutes an SOS Sahel 'product'] from the organisation's beginnings, and its geographical development has been greatly influenced by their interests and preferences. Following the enthusiasms of individuals is often an effective way of starting an organisation off, but if extended into the period of organisational growth it encourages arbitrary rather than strategic choices.[41]

To some extent, SOS Sahel UK was facing the classic challenge of organisational growth from youth to maturity. For example, it needed to professionalise and systematise its procedures, especially its financial management system. More profoundly, the report provided a stark analysis of the organisation's unsustainable business model. In a challenging funding context, the span and location of SOS Sahel UK's projects made economies of scale hard to achieve. The organisation was severely 'under-capitalised' yet the London office was heavily involved in day-to-day programme management. This was frustrating to staff at country level; it constrained the space for strategic thinking and management, and contributed to a sense of crisis management and overload at the headquarters level. Although the weakness of the business model had been apparent to senior management for some time, the consultants drew this to the attention of all stakeholders, and in particular the Board. Aptly entitled 'Punching above its weight', their report presented SOS Sahel UK with five options for reorganisation:

1. Closure of the London headquarters.
2. Take-over by a larger, well-funded, multi-sector agency.
3. Federation, as a group of self-managed agencies, each with their own governance structure, bound together by a vision incorporating a common philosophy and approaches
4. Merger with a like-minded NGO.
5. Creation of an SOS Sahel UK Network, whereby SOS Sahel Programme Directors have full responsibility for the development and management of their respective country programme but stop short of becoming independent organisations.

They recommended the fifth option, challenging the organisation to delegate authority rather than 'deconcentrate' tasks, to develop a more strategic approach to its future development, and to step up fundraising.

The report was a wake-up call to trustees, to whom the report was directed. Indeed, the consultants highlighted some of the limitations of how the Board was operating at the time, with recommendations for reform of the Board structure to develop closer links between staff and board and make more use of the skills and contacts of Board members.

This analysis resulted in a commitment by the Board and senior management to a more radical shift in power and decision-making authority. There followed a process of planning and consultation, with a meeting of all country directors in London in July 1999, and again in September 2000, to plan and roll out the decentralisation process. As a first step towards decentralised financial management, this required getting financial information to countries to enable them to manage their budgets, and improved communications from London to country offices for more transparent budgeting.

However, this process was rapidly overtaken by a serious financial crisis of unrestricted funding that became apparent in early 2000. SOS Sahel UK's budget had almost doubled between 1998/1999 and 2000/2001. This had been artificially inflated by income from emergency programming in Ethiopia in 2000/2001. At the same time that the administrative percentage from the emergency programme disappeared, many donors were exerting pressure to cut overhead costs from project budgets, and SOS Sahel UK's financial shortfall became apparent. It could no longer cover the costs of the UK office nor the Addis Ababa office. In short, the organisation had become overly dependent on unpredictable 'windfall' income to cover its overheads.

This change in funding context exposed the financial vulnerability of many small and medium-sized UK-based INGOs – and the challenge of raising 'the last 10% of income', in the words of the CEO at the time.[42] Unlike larger INGOs, SOS Sahel did not have other unrestricted sources of funding to draw upon. Reserves, which had been gradually declining since 1995/1996, were more rapidly run

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42   During this period, SOS Sahel UK's CEO was a member of a group of small and medium-sized UK-based NGOs all facing similar financial and sustainability challenges as the funding environment had shifted to favour larger INGOs and much larger grants. Such organisations were rarely in a position to have a dedicated fundraising operation.

down in 2001. The organisation faced a dilemma: it needed to invest in fundraising but this was put on hold because the reserves could not carry the cost. For the first time in the organisation's history, the Board began to regularly monitor closure costs to ensure the organisation was still solvent.

2.2 Exploring merger

The financial crisis gave a sense of urgency to the plan to localise and transform. Suddenly all the options in the consultants' report were on the table. The organisation began to consider a merger with a like-minded NGO (option 4). With a strong sense of its own identity and set of values, SOS Sahel UK actively sought a merger with an agency of similar size and profile and with a shared interest in a definitive move of initiative and authority to Africa, but with complementary experience and assets. This led the senior leadership and Board to approach Farm Africa, Tree Aid and the Agency for Cooperation and Research in Development (ACORD) respectively. However, these other medium-sized NGOs were similarly hard-pressed financially and unwilling to take risks by diverting scarce resources to merge and integrate.[43] ACORD was the preferred option, as it had a similar philosophy of shifting its centre of gravity to Africa, but it did not have the financial strength to consider a merger.

The focus then switched to merging with a larger organisation, with ActionAid the preferred and most interested NGO. In mid-2002 both agencies embarked on an intensive and thorough five-month process, with consultations in at least two of the countries where SOS Sahel UK was operating. The conclusion was that creating a joint 'Sahel programme' could provide substantial added value for both organisations. But this was rapidly followed by a decision from ActionAid's senior management that they did not wish to proceed for three main reasons. Once again, funding was an issue, as they prioritised their own country programmes in Africa; there was insufficient buy-in from senior leadership to provide the necessary management input; and there was a wariness to begin a partnership through merger that required organisational restructuring that would 'set a very negative foundation for such a partnership'.[44]

While this was a major blow to securing SOS Sahel UK's future, there had been reservations about a merger with ActionAid, particularly among SOS Sahel's country-level staff. They anticipated that SOS Sahel UK could get swallowed up and lost within ActionAid, and that they would lose control of their future if ActionAid subsequently decided to close down the Sahel programme.

ActionAid's decision, at the end of October 2002, left SOS Sahel UK with very little time to find another solution. By the end of 2002, insolvency was forecast as reserves could no longer cover closure costs. Programme and project staff were given precautionary notice of closure and some UK staff were working under notice.

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43   As captured in the statement by SOS Sahel UK's CEO, 2002.
44   ActionAid letter to SOS Sahel UK.

For about a year, SOS Sahel UK had actively sought a merger to keep its work alive, which had occupied much time on the part of senior management and the Board. Although none of the prospective mergers succeeded, the experience of exploring this avenue offers valuable learning for other NGOs considering this option, as outlined in Box 5.

Box 5   Learning about NGO merger from the SOS Sahel UK experience

- NGO merger discussions triggered by crisis tend to be driven by financial considerations and survival of the NGO facing insolvency, when instead the focus should be on the respective organisation's strategic purpose and how it can best serve its target population.
- It is important to be absolutely clear about the essence and values of each agency, to assess the fit and whether the merger will work to maintain what is worth preserving in each. For SOS Sahel UK, this was described as 'the essentials of the experimental and empowering approach'.[i]
- Mergers cost money, especially if driven by financial pressures on the part of one or both organisations, and are unlikely to succeed if adequate financial resources are not available.
- There must be buy-in at all levels, from trustees to staff, in both organisations for a merger to be worthwhile and to work.
- A merger between two organisations of very different scales requires explicit acknowledgement of the power dynamics and the risk of the smaller organisation disappearing into the larger.
- Due diligence means carrying out a thorough feasibility assessment of the proposed merger, to include (1) assessing the commitment of management in both agencies; and (2) the motivation of the stronger organisation.

i Statement by SOS Sahel UK's CEO, 2002.

2.3 Transforming country programmes into national NGOs through an accelerated process of decentralisation

As the merger talks collapsed, SOS Sahel cobbled together small grants from a range of NGOs and private donors. Despite the looming threat of closure, it still held open the prospect of creating a new Sahel Alliance, transforming itself from a UK-based NGO to an African-led alliance of independent but linked organisations. The budget for such a process of organisational change was estimated at around £400,000. All hopes were pinned on a proposal submitted to Comic Relief in December 2002, for 'urgent funding support' of £190,000[45].

By early 2003 the financial situation had become critical. Just as plans were being firmed up for the London office to close, the news came through that the Comic Relief proposal had been approved. This gave SOS Sahel UK a much-needed reprieve. What could have been its death throes became an opportunity to radically restructure. It had 15 months (from January 2003 to March 2004) to embark on a major process of organisational transformation from a UK-based NGO to five national NGOs (including the Kenya country programme). The intention was 'to preserve and strengthen what is valuable from SOS Sahel's ten years of experience in working with pastoralists and other marginal groups, enabling them to acquire a more authoritative voice in overcoming poverty and marginalisation'.[46] More specifically, the aim was 'to create a Sahel Alliance in which strong independent (but interlinked) national Sahel organisations work with their partners to address the rights and needs of Sahelian rural people'. The idea of creating an Africa-based 'umbrella' organisation was briefly considered, following the ACORD model, but was rejected on the grounds that the devolved country programmes did not have the resources to set it up and that it would add an extra layer of bureaucracy and undermine the development of strong, autonomous national organisations.

There followed two key meetings to launch the transformation process. The first planning workshop took place in Addis Ababa over eight days in February 2003, soon after the Comic Relief grant had been approved. The aim was for participants from country programmes to understand and take ownership of this transformation project and to agree action plans for its implementation. At this meeting it was agreed there would be a Secretariat for the Alliance partly based in the UK and partly in Mali.

The second meeting took place in Bamako in October 2003. At this meeting, all country programmes made the commitment to become national NGOs by March 2004 (although in reality it took much longer in Ethiopia and Sudan) and the mandate and form of a Sahel Alliance was agreed. This was captured in the Bamako Declaration on an Africa Drylands Alliance. The Alliance would become an issue-led coalition.

As will be explained, the original vision for the Alliance was never realised, but the process and output of the Bamako Declaration was important for two reasons. First, it was very much driven by the leaders of SOS Sahel UK's Africa country programmes through a highly participatory and consultative process. This took time: five days of face-to-face discussions in Bamako as different

perspectives and experiences were shared between the East and West Africa programmes. Second, it defined the role and relationship that Alliance members wished to have with SOS Sahel UK – as an alliance partner providing support in developing funding proposals and, when necessary, acting as lead agency to broker relationships with other organisations to widen the range of skills and experience and to enhance impact across the Sahel. This marked a turning point when the locus of power and decision-making started to shift from the UK headquarters to the Africa programmes:

> Up to this stage the UK Board had been somewhat ambivalent about transformation but the Bamako meeting gave a strong message from the South not only about the desirability of change, but also its direction. A series of recommendations were developed in Bamako and the Mali based Coordinator was delegated to present them at the next UK Board meeting in November 2003.[47]

The 15-month period of the Comic Relief grant and the tight financial situation focused minds. In early 2003, only the Niger country programme had a clearly defined and documented medium-term strategy. By mid-2004 all others had followed suit, with consultancy support. The organisational change process was tightly managed, led by the Mali-based coordinator. However, the capacity and self-sufficiency of the different country programmes varied widely. The Sudan country programme was weakest, especially in financial management, while the Ethiopia country programme was probably strongest, although operating in a difficult political context. The capacity-building needs of each country programme were identified and supported by the UK-based team as far as possible through this period, with the emphasis on finance and contract management so that these functions could be handed over from the London office.

Meanwhile, capacity in the UK was shrinking fast. By the end of 2003 the staff complement had reduced from 5.5 to 2.5 positions. This was a painful period of redundancies, including of the CEO, and the break-up of a tight-knit team. To some extent the UK Board took up the slack. During the transition period to May 2004 their input increased an estimated three-fold with the creation of three sub-committees: Programme and Strategy (which included some external resource persons);[48] Finance and Administration; and Grants. The UK part of the organisation was at a crossroads: should it wind up after handing over to the newly created national NGOs, or did it still have a role to play? At this critical juncture the Board decided it should have a role in supporting the Africa Drylands Alliance and reorienting to engage more with pan-Sahelian research, as well as fundraising and continuing to support the nascent national NGOs.

In early 2005, a new CEO with a strong background in organisational development was appointed to SOS Sahel UK, to steward the next phase of localisation. After spending her first weeks visiting the country programmes, she alerted the Board to a sense of frustration, at times anger, among the in-country senior leadership about the transformation process. They did not feel they had been fully informed about the financial crisis that had triggered it, and now felt they were being asked to bear

47   Final report to Comic Relief, 2004.
48   The resource persons were drawn from IIED, the Natural Resources Institute, ActionAid and TreeAid

the brunt in terms of a rushed process of localisation. In April 2005, the third meeting of all country programmes was held in Negelle, Ethiopia (see Box 6). By now all country programmes except Sudan had registered as national NGOs. This meeting proved to be another turning point. Designed to engage with the emotions and undercurrents of the change process, it marked a significant move forward in terms of building consensus and trust. The Africa Drylands Alliance was renamed 'The Sahel Alliance', defining its mandate in relation to a single ecosystem. The Negelle Constitution on the Sahel Alliance was formulated, indicating that the chair would rotate between East and West Africa and the UK would be the sixth and equal member of the alliance. While the Africa-based organisations focused their efforts on localisation, the UK office was asked to run the alliance secretariat for the first two years.

Box 6   The Negelle meeting in Ethiopia, 2005

The Negelle meeting was facilitated by the Community Development Resource Association (CDRA) of South Africa. Story-telling and drawings were used to surface the feelings and emotions around the transformation process. This captured the sense of abandonment that some country programmes felt in terms of their relationship with the UK. The process proved cathartic in being able to move forward.

The Negelle meeting explored a second important theme: connecting with the global context. An internationally renowned political economist was invited to talk about globalisation. This delivered two important messages for nascent national NGOs:

1. that NGOs would struggle to achieve long-term change unless they considered how the communities and environments in which they worked were affected by the global context; and
2. that in order to operate within and influence the global context, NGOs must engage with alliances and supra-national partnerships.

This would be critical to the sustainability of national NGOs. The deliberate decision to convene this meeting far from the Ethiopian capital, where participants could meet with pastoralist communities caretaking the indigenous forest, helped to ground the discussions.

2.4 A brief summary of the experience of each of the component parts of SOS Sahel UK through the transformation process[49]

2.4.1 UK

By 2005, the pared-down UK office comprised a part-time director, a part-time finance manager and a part-time support officer. The office that had long been SOS Sahel's home in north London was sold and the proceeds invested in fundraising. The small team moved first to rent-free accommodation from ActionAid and subsequently to Oxford. In 2003/2004, rumours of closure of SOS Sahel UK were circulating. When the new CEO was appointed in 2005, those rumours had to be quashed, particularly among donors. Instead, SOS Sahel UK had to redefine itself as a Northern-based NGO working with Southern partners on NRM in African drylands, with a focus on capacity building, partner fundraising and contract management, while also supporting the Alliance. A new three-year strategy was drafted, and subsequently updated to become a ten-year strategy from 2006 to 2015. SOS Sahel UK's mission statement became: 'work[ing] with African partners in the Sahel for the rights and livelihoods of poor, marginalised dryland dwellers, and for the sustainability of the fragile environment on which they depend'.

2.4.2 Niger

Led by an expatriate couple, the Niger programme had been largely self-sufficient apart from financial control and back-up from the UK. This was both a blessing and a curse. Regarded as a strong team, the managers of the Niger programme felt that they were presented with a *fait accompli* from UK headquarters: to find a legal and financial solution to becoming independent very quickly, or to wind up. The legal solution was easier. They negotiated to become part of SOS Sahel Niger, a national NGO established in the 1970s and connected with SOS Sahel France, with whom they already had a working relationship. The SOS Sahel UK country programme became the Cellule de Recherche Action Concertee sur la Gestion des Ressources Naturelles (CRAC-GRN, the Collaborative Action Research Unit for NRM) within SOS Sahel Niger, raising its own funds. The financial solution was much harder, although it was a priority for the team to maintain some programme autonomy. All staff contracts were signed over to SOS Sahel Niger by mid-2004, as the UK office made it clear they were unable to pay staff salaries or redundancies. For the first 18 months, the expatriate staff effectively funded the programme with their own resources and the local staff took salary reductions. Gradually CRAC-GRN built up a portfolio of projects so that they were solvent and fully functional once again. In 2008 the leadership was handed over to a senior national staff member who had been key to the programme for some years. However, his untimely death in 2013 was a major

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49   SOS Sahel UK's presence in Kenya had been much more short-lived. Essentially the programme was just one project without the history or institutional depth of the other four country programmes. In March 2005 it merged with Resource Projects-Kenya (RPK), thus ending a period of uncertainty, although still requesting support from the UK.

setback to CRAC-GRN at a time when the funding environment in Niger became more challenging. CRAC-GRN stopped developing its own projects, instead joining INGO consortia. It was less able to follow the culture and approach associated with SOS Sahel UK.

2.4.3 Mali

Localisation of SOS Sahel UK in Mali also moved fast. In the early 2000s the political context was favourable for national NGOs and SOS Sahel UK had a strong reputation. By 2004 Sahel Eco was registered as a private, not-for-profit association, and later that year was legally recognised as a national NGO. A financial management system was put in place and all employee contracts transferred, including for the expatriate director. This was achieved in close collaboration with the Near East Foundation and Intercooperation, both INGOs that, in May 2003, pledged to support the creation of a new national NGO, Sahel Eco. Board members were identified, although governance issues beset Sahel Eco for some time. At the Negelle meeting in 2005, Sahel Eco's expatriate director said: 'what had felt like a threat now feels like an opportunity'. Nevertheless, as with the Niger experience, the commitment and dedication of the Sahel Eco team was critical to the organisation's survival. With sharply declining support from the UK they also felt that the choice, of either making it work or closing, was ultimately theirs. In 2013 the leadership passed to a national director.

2.4.4 Ethiopia

The Ethiopia country programme was on an altogether different scale, with at least four times as many project staff. As mentioned, it had been the strongest financially and in management terms, although for a while it had become heavily dependent on short-term emergency funding. However, compared with the West Africa examples, the political context was extremely challenging for transforming an INGO into a national one. Bureaucratic registration procedures were lengthy and there were stringent government criteria for the eligibility of Board members, all of whom had to be approved by government. As a result, although SOS Sahel Ethiopia was registered as a national NGO in February 2005 (a year later than anticipated), it did not become fully operational in its own right until December 2007. This was described as 'a worrying and frustrating process' by staff. The highly respected Ethiopian country director, who had worked for SOS Sahel UK in Ethiopia for many years, skillfully guided the organisation through the political rapids and remains at the helm in 2021. Despite being such a difficult and uncertain process, SOS Sahel Ethiopia's transformation into a national NGO is widely regarded as a success, ultimately dependent on development rather than humanitarian funding. Other organisations now approach it for advice. However, the slow process of becoming a national NGO meant that SOS Sahel Ethiopia benefitted from continued support from the UK for much longer than its West African counterparts.

2.4.5 Sudan

The political context in Sudan was yet more challenging. National NGOs were at high risk of government interference and control. Sudanese law required national NGOs to have at least 30

founding members, constituting a General Assembly, out of which board members would be elected. All board members had to be approved by government. SOS Sahel UK had a strong track record at project level in Sudan but was not well known at national level. At the time of SOS Sahel's transformation, Sudan was going through a major historical transformation through the peace process with South Sudan and the signing of the Comprehensive Peace Agreement. This created an additional layer of uncertainty. In 2005 it was still not clear what organisational status would work for SOS Sahel in Sudan: a national NGO, an association, or some other configuration. Of all the four country programmes, SOS Sahel in Sudan received most support from the UK office. This included financial management and fundraising support, capacity development, mentoring and even the secondment of a UK staff member to the Khartoum office for around a year.[50] The slow transformation meant that, for a while, there were de facto two SOS Sahel organisations working in Sudan: many staff were still employed by SOS Sahel UK while the national NGO, Sahel Sudan, was being established. This caused considerable confusion among donors, government and other NGOs. Registration of SOS Sahel Sudan was finally completed in 2010, but the handover from SOS Sahel UK was not completed until 2014. During this time the leadership of the Sudan programme had changed from a Sudanese director with long-term knowledge of SOS Sahel's programming to a new Sudanese director, also with strong local-level field experience but who had many years' experience of working for INGOs while engaging closely with national NGOs and Sudanese civil society. The new director was therefore well placed to lead the organisation into its next chapter.

2.5 The story of the Sahel Alliance

The original plan for the Alliance was for it to act as a 'vehicle to increase impact and policy influence by combining experience, strengths and key relationships across the Sahel', while the national NGOs would focus more on community-level projects.[51] To give it meaning and substance, this meant developing and raising funds for pan-Sahel alliance proposals. But once the country programmes were on the path to full independence, there was neither the energy nor the resources to pursue this vision.

The UK attempted to take the lead in fundraising but was not successful. The first policy-focused proposal to protect and enhance pastoralists' environmental rights was submitted to Comic Relief in 2004 but was rejected.[52] In line with the shifting locus of power and decision-making, the UK office was clear that the initiative and drive for the Alliance had to come from the national NGOs in Africa. At each Alliance meeting the four national (or emergent) NGOs restated their belief in the value of the Alliance and their commitment to work jointly. But these proved to be 'moments of interest and engagement … with little sense of joint purpose between them'.[53] When the directors returned home, they had to prioritise their own programmes' survival, which left little time to focus specifically on the Alliance.

53   Personal communication.

There were two other major constraints: first, the challenge of working across the anglophone/ francophone divide in the Sahel, in terms of language (translation costs at workshops were substantial), different colonial histories and legacies, and differences in the policy and political context. Second, it was expensive to bring the national NGOs together at a time when financial resources were scarce, yet building relationships informally was key to the success of the Alliance. The SMCPR project is one of the few examples of SOS Sahel UK successfully working across its West and East Africa programmes, and IIED is one of the few institutions to have consistently achieved this through long-term investment in research and relationships. The concept of the Sahel Alliance morphed into something very different: a pragmatic relationship between SOS Sahel Ethiopia and SOS Sahel Sudan with input and support from SOS Sahel UK. The focus was on exchanging experience and strategies for developing and running an effective national NGO in a challenging political context.

2.6 Financial crisis revisited: 2008/2009

Having failed to raise funds for alliance proposals, and as the newly nationalised NGOs raised funding for their own projects, SOS Sahel UK faced a second financial crisis in 2008/2009. Once again, this raised questions about the role and purpose of the UK office and whether it should be wound up. But the success of localisation in Ethiopia, and especially in Sudan where the country programme was still a long way from becoming a national NGO, was highly dependent on the UK team. This time a different and highly innovative solution was found. One of the SOS Sahel UK trustees – an employee of the UK-based NGO Skillshare International – brokered an agreement for Skillshare[54] to support SOS Sahel UK and underwrite their finances for six months until the next grant came through. During this period, they also funded one of SOS Sahel UK's staff members, including his secondment to Sudan. This was not a merger but a temporary alliance that was mobilised quickly. This arrangement meant that SOS Sahel UK ceded some control for a period of time when one of the Skillshare International trustees became Chair of the SOS Sahel UK Board. But it also gave SOS Sahel UK much-needed breathing space to build its funding base. SOS Sahel UK did not have to call on Skillshare's underwriting, demonstrating that this was an interesting, creative and ultimately successful experiment, enabling a small NGO to bridge a particularly challenging financial period during which cashflow forecasts were as critical as budgeting.

However, it also resulted in SOS Sahel UK letting go of its CEO at the time. When the difficulties of fundraising for the UK office to play a policy research and influencing role became apparent, the organisation could no longer afford such experienced CEOs. Recognising that the UK's role was principally a supportive one, developing capacity and supporting its African partners, the profile of the UK staff team changed. Under the leadership of a highly skilled financial manager, it became a project support team. But this team needed bolstering: in 2015, once finances had recovered sufficiently, a new CEO was appointed but with a very different mandate of supporting the African partners, principally in Sudan and Ethiopia.

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54   Skillshare International had experience of a number of successful mergers, for example with ActionHealth and Coaching for Hope, and had taken over Responding to Conflict.

2.7 Evolution of the Board of SOS Sahel UK: reflections on governance through the transformation process

When SOS Sahel UK was created, the Board had been very 'hands on', the founder was closely involved, and they retained a strong connection to projects at country level. As the organisation expanded in the 1990s the Board also grew, but by the late 1990s senior management felt that the Board had lost some of that connection and understanding of SOS Sahel's work.

The consultants' report, *Punching above its weight*, surfaced the issue. They concluded that Board meetings alone did not give trustees the opportunity for a thorough and informed discussion of key issues, management did not have a sense of informed support from and involvement of Board members, and the abilities and knowledge of Board members were not being fully utilised. This triggered the first process of reform in how the Board functioned, with the creation of the three sub-committees as described previously.

The financial crisis and beginning of the transformation process triggered further change. As some trustees left, others with experience relevant to localisation were recruited. Crucially, at least one trustee was present at each of the Alliance transformation meetings. This direct connection ensured that the Board was closely tracking and engaged with the process and its dynamics. But there were still choppy waters to navigate, particularly around the evolving role of the UK office, with varying views held by different Board members, and a division emerging between trustees from within and outside the sector regarding the process of localisation, with the latter holding more reservations.

The Skillshare/SOS Sahel UK alliance triggered further changes at Board level. It gave some longstanding members of the Board confidence that the organisation would continue and that they could step down. This opened up space for the majority of trustees to be drawn from the development sector for the first time, and for the Board to increase its diversity. The former was important for a small NGO requiring more hands-on engagement from the Board. The latter proved more challenging. Two highly qualified trustees of African origin were appointed to the Board, but neither stayed for more than two years due to competing demands on their time.

When SOS Sahel's UK-based team reduced to three people, they were outnumbered by trustees, which at times felt unwieldy to the staff. On the one hand, the trustees were much more closely engaged with SOS Sahel UK and much better informed than at times in the past. On the other hand, there were periods when some trustees had to play a more hands-on role to fill gaps due to limited staff resources, especially when there was no CEO. This was clearly neither appropriate nor sustainable long-term. When a new CEO was appointed in 2015, a more appropriate and conventional division of roles was reestablished between management and the Board.

Chapter 3 Learning about the process of transformation from SOS Sahel UK's experience

3.1 The challenges

The early years of the transformation process were challenging; this was particularly acute for the West Africa programmes, which transformed into national NGOs first and fastest.

3.1.1 Organisational transformation at speed and in crisis mode

Although some form of localisation had long been an SOS Sahel UK objective, the speed at which it happened in Niger and Mali, while the organisation was in 'crisis mode', was a major challenge. These two country programmes were best placed to become national NGOs and were operating in the most favourable domestic political contexts; therefore, they were expected to jump first. However, the speed and lack of strategy behind the process meant that the respective teams had to shoulder a heavy burden administratively and financially, with limited external support. Neither country programme had time to secure long-term funding before becoming national NGOs. Members of the Niger team recount being given a couple of weeks to wind up one of their major projects unless they found an immediate solution. Due to the extraordinary commitment of the director and staff, they managed to keep all projects going using their own personal resources until they were able to secure more contracts and funding. This experience is a reminder of the importance of localising slowly, having done the groundwork and consultation first, with a clear strategic plan and milestones that dictate the speed of change, for example around securing funding.

3.1.2 Focus on managerial capacity building when more holistic organisational support was needed

The UK office initially focused on building country programme capacity so that contractual and financial management could be handed over. In the rush to transform the Mali country programme into a national NGO, two key areas were overlooked: building reserves and building governance. In other words, localisation was not approached holistically. Three years after the Mali country programme became Sahel Eco, the UK office transferred a lump sum from the administrative funds of a project it had managed. This was crucial to Sahel Eco setting up its reserves, managing its cash flow and covering its running costs while awaiting the receipt of new project funds, but this had not been strategically planned. Sahel Eco also received very little support for establishing a functional Board. Overwhelmed by the exigencies of day-to-day management, Sahel Eco's director was not able to give this much time, and there was limited experience of NGO governance within Mali. As a consequence it took eight years for the Board to become active and fully functional.

3.1.3 Transformation with limited resources and an imposed timetable

By definition, embarking on transformation out of a financial crisis means that funds are scarce. For 15 months, the Comic Relief grant provided vital resources, but it was not enough. When the Niger and Mali country programmes became independent entities they had to rapidly take on all the roles previously played by the UK office, from financial management to monitoring and evaluation to donor reporting, but without any additional resources except for setting up the finance system. Transformation in Sudan and Ethiopia took much longer, and the 'vehicle had run out of fuel'.[55] This further delayed the process in Ethiopia, where the country programme had to raise funds from other sources to cover core costs and strategy development. It also meant that staff at country level were carrying particularly heavy workloads as they struggled to find the balance between managing the transformation process and moving it forward, while also running the organisation on a day-to-day basis. Some senior national staff left during this period because of concerns about the uncertain future.

The Niger and Mali programmes were forced to become independent NGOs within a couple of years. With hindsight, according to stakeholders at the heart of the process, this should have been a 5–10-year process guided by achieving certain milestones rather than an externally imposed timetable. In the very difficult political context of Sudan, the timetable was extended year after year. In the words of one SOS Sahel UK staff member: 'let go of the timeline. Rather it is about building reputation and a track record … be clear about the outcomes, and then be prepared for as long as it takes to deliver them, rather than adhering to an [artificial] timeline'. However, in Sudan this also caused complications with donors and with government, as the national NGO had been registered before SOS Sahel UK had withdrawn.

3.1.4 Communication failings

The seriousness of the financial crisis facing the organisation had not been well communicated at the beginning of the transformation process, nor the reasons why the West Africa country programmes were expected to nationalise first. This gave rise to anger and resentment in country programmes when the extent of the crisis later became apparent. This was felt most strongly within the Niger and Mali programmes, which felt they were shouldering the burden by having to localise at speed and without the same support and attention received by the Sudan and Ethiopia programmes. External facilitation at crucial moments was key (for example at the Negelle meeting) to ensure that challenges and emotions were shared and discussed.

3.1.5 Misunderstanding by donors

While donors soon became aware of the transformation journey that SOS Sahel UK had embarked upon, some lost confidence because of uncertainty about the outcome, and even about the process

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55   Quote from one of the country programme stakeholders.

itself. There was a misperception among some donors that SOS Sahel was closing its UK office completely. At least three funding proposals were rejected by donors largely on those grounds. Consumed by the challenges of transformation, the organisation had little capacity to manage external communications and perceptions, which became neglected. An external communications strategy was lacking.

3.2 Factors contributing to the success of localisation

In the face of these considerable challenges, it is all the more remarkable that the four country programmes successfully localised. The following factors contributed to that success.

3.2.1 Commitment, values and skillsets of the individuals involved

Chapter 1 explained the importance of the fit between the individuals working for SOS Sahel UK and the organisation's approach to development. The commitment of those individuals – many of whom had worked for SOS Sahel for many years – was essential to making localisation a success. The skills in the UK team – particularly the soft skills of listening, coaching and mentoring, as well as their belief in the end goal – were crucial. The CEO appointed in 2005 also brought learning from other INGOs, including WaterAid, and drew up detailed guidelines that proved 'extraordinarily useful'[56] to the newly localised NGOs. In addition she brought a deep understanding of the essence of the transformation process to national NGOs. It was fundamental that all staff shared values and commitment to community-based development, and by extension to African-led organisations. This demonstrates how organisational change is fundamentally about individuals and processes. Shared values and appropriate skillsets among those leading the process are essential.

3.2.2 The calibre of national leadership

When the expatriate directors left Sahel Eco and CRAC-GRN in Mali and Niger respectively,[57] they handed over to experienced local leaders. In CRAC-GRN's case, the new leader was steeped in SOS Sahel UK's development approach, while in Sahel Eco's case, although the director was new, other key staff within the organisation had long worked for SOS Sahel UK. The directors in Ethiopia and Sudan had been locally recruited – in Ethiopia many years before the transformation process, and in Sudan to lead the process of localisation. Both were highly respected civil society leaders with strong networks and credibility within the international aid community in their respective countries as well as within the national NGO sector. In essence, strong and experienced national leadership was essential to the localisation process.

56　In the words of the director of one of the new national NGOs.
57　The speed of localisation in Mali and Niger meant that the expatriate director of the respective SOS Sahel UK country programme became the executive director of the new national NGO, until such time as it was possible to hand over to a nationally recruited director.

3.2.3 The UK office prepared to relinquish power

In the late 1990s, the UK Board, and to some extent the UK office, had been reluctant to let go, aware of its financial responsibility and accountability obligations. The financial imperative to transform forced the issue. Once the objective of the transformation process to national NGOs had been set, and the direction of travel was clear, the commitment to relinquish power and control gathered momentum. Once again individuals were key, in terms of their belief in the process and its end goal, as well as their values. Staff in the UK office and Board members developed the habit of continually checking and questioning themselves and each other about their relevance and role, and frequently sought feedback from the SOS Sahel leadership in Ethiopia and Sudan. This required considerable self-awareness at the UK end to catch any reflex to step in and take control, especially when the national NGO was facing difficulties, as in the case of SOS Sahel South Sudan.

3.2.4 Becoming a partnership of equals

Senior staff in the country programmes are quick to point out that the relationship with the UK office did not feel like a partnership of equals at the outset of the localisation process. Although not an overly hierarchical NGO, SOS Sahel UK was nevertheless managed and directed from its UK office. As each country programme became an independent entity, there was a natural, and at times deliberate, rebalancing of the power relationship with the UK office. Sometimes it required the new national NGO to assert its independence. One example of this came in 2004, when the Board of Sahel Eco rejected a clause in the memorandum of understanding proposed by SOS Sahel UK that the latter should have the right at any time to review the accounts of Sahel Eco, which was clearly at odds with it becoming an independent NGO. Instead, over time, the financial future of SOS Sahel UK became increasingly dependent on SOS Sahel Sudan and SOS Sahel Ethiopia programme proposals including a budget line for input and support for the UK office. This was a fundamental shift in the nature of the relationship.

3.2.5 Building on a solid foundation

In each of the four countries, localisation was built on a foundation, established over many years, of a strong track record of community-based development, a cadre of trained and experienced staff, including at senior management level, and a functioning office. The SOS Sahel country programmes also retained experienced and committed national staff for long periods, which was unusual in the sector. Even though some capacities still had to be strengthened, this solid foundation was critical to success, and partly explains why the national NGOs flourished in Niger, Mali, Ethiopia and Sudan, but not in South Sudan, which started from scratch in 2011 with the encouragement of SOS Sahel Sudan.

3.2.6 Long-term accompaniment for SOS Sahel Ethiopia and SOS Sahel Sudan

Both SOS Sahel Ethiopia and SOS Sahel Sudan benefitted from the accompaniment and support of SOS Sahel UK over many years. This took several forms: from ongoing capacity development of national staff, to brokering relationships with international organisations, to SOS Sahel UK occasionally managing grants for donors that required an INGO to take that role, to supporting monitoring and evaluation. Of huge benefit to SOS Sahel Sudan was the secondment of SOS Sahel UK's finance manager to its Khartoum office, boosting its institutional fundraising and therefore its financial health at a crucial time in its establishment as a viable national NGO. Undoubtedly this meant that, despite the challenging political context, both of these national NGOs had a much easier journey than CRAC-GRN and Sahel Eco, which had much more limited support and therefore had to embark on much of the journey on their own.

3.3 The vital role of governance and leadership

Putting in place effective governance structures for each of the national NGOs has been critical to their success. Although this was not always a straightforward or easy process, being able to make a clear distinction between the Board and management of the NGO is key to their credibility.

The national leadership of each national NGO has been vital to their respective success; however, the longer-term challenge is managing leadership succession. Sahel Eco has successfully managed one iteration of this, from the first expatriate director to the second national director, allaying concerns of some external stakeholders that it could fall foul of 'founder syndrome'. CRAC-GRN also successfully managed the transition from its expatriate leadership to national leadership, although the untimely death of the new national leader has had implications for the continuity of its work and approach. SOS Sahel Sudan and SOS Sahel Ethiopia, each of which already had a national director at the time of transition, are yet to navigate succession.

Chapter 4   Implications of localisation for SOS Sahel's development approach

4.1 Introduction

This chapter follows the story of localisation after the four country programmes became national NGOs. Of course, the trajectory varied from one country to another, with SOS Sahel Sudan and SOS Sahel Ethiopia retaining a much closer relationship and identity with SOS Sahel UK, while Sahel Eco and CRAC-GRN developed their own independent identities much more quickly. The trajectory of each national NGO was also influenced by the very different political contexts: generally conducive and welcoming to national NGOs in Mali and Niger, and much more challenging in Sudan and Ethiopia.

4.2 Advantages of becoming a national NGO

As a result of SOS Sahel UK's development approach, the national NGOs were already strongly rooted in civil society by the time they became independent, and were known for the depth and breadth of their local engagement. In the words of one seasoned development worker:

> 'They have always manifested the best of civil society, rooted in context … They are not unique in that, but we are losing it in the development sector as we become bureaucratised. They have never lost that identity in SOS Sahel'.

The process of localisation amplified this identity.

In each country, the newly created national NGO benefitted from the legacy of SOS Sahel UK. After all, the staff, projects and approach had not changed, rather the status and governance. The national NGOs had inherited a strong brand and track record and were regarded as credible within the international aid sector: able to meet the standards and compliance requirements expected of an INGO, yet deeply rooted in community development. In Ethiopia and Sudan, some donors simply switched to channeling funds directly through the national NGO.

The new national NGOs were now free to create a wider network of partnerships with other INGOs. Diversification was particularly important in francophone West Africa, where being overly UK-focused was regarded as a risky strategy. In Mali, for example, Sahel Eco reshaped its Malian identity with donors and others as the SOS Sahel connection became more tenuous. In the political context of Sudan, where donors and INGOs were struggling to find strong yet independent national NGOs with which to partner, becoming a national NGO opened up new opportunities. SOS Sahel Sudan quickly became the national NGO 'of choice', importantly putting it in a position of being able to choose its international partnerships. In this case it also maintained a stronger connection with SOS Sahel UK for reasons described previously.

4.3 Development approach

As well as securing its financial viability, each new national NGO still prioritises its community-based work focused on NRM. To this day, the participatory, consultative approach that has been the hallmark of SOS Sahel projects has continued, often addressing the issue of the citizen–state relationship that is essential to effective NRM management and governance. All organisations have also maintained a long-term commitment to communities and to geographical areas. It is through this long-term engagement that the national organisations have sustained the contextual understanding and relationships at community level that are the essence of this approach.

Of course, there has been some divergence of direction between the four national NGOs. Sahel Eco, for example, emphasises natural regeneration of trees managed by farmers on their land, promoting climate-resilient agriculture and engaged in value-chain work on forest products. With a broader focus on community resilience, they are engaging in the promotion of renewable energy, diversification of income-generating activities, and social services. SOS Sahel Ethiopia describes moving into the 'second generation' of development issues in Kindo Koisha, where it has had a presence since the late 1980s. This involves working on market integration and agro-forestry. SOS Sahel Sudan has developed new expertise in sand dams as an appropriate form of technology for dryland areas, which it is now rolling out in at least three different geographical areas. To some extent this reflects a naturally broadening engagement with communities with which the national NGOs have long-standing relationships. But it also reflects shifting priorities within the international aid sector, especially with the emergence of the resilience paradigm.

Donor demands are also important and, as national NGOs with very limited unrestricted funding, they have had to be responsive to these. But, secure in their own identity, they have also been relatively successful in resisting some of those demands. Despite deteriorating security in Mali, Sahel Eco has held out against becoming a humanitarian agency distributing large amounts of food aid (although it still engages in small-scale humanitarian interventions), which would almost certainly distract it from its longer-term community development work. SOS Sahel Sudan, as one of the few remaining agencies in South Kordofan, resisted pressure from the UN to engage in disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration (DDR), in which it does not have expertise and which would have similarly drawn it away from its core development work. Consciously deciding not to be so contract-driven despite resource challenges is a credit to the integrity of the respective national NGOs.

What has suffered since becoming national NGOs are the capacity and resources to do the action research that had been such a strong feature of SOS Sahel UK's approach. This loss is both acknowledged and lamented by the respective executive directors. (In Ethiopia it was actively discouraged by government policy on national NGOs.) Other stakeholders have also commented on this gap, which deprives the national NGOs of the benefits of an external and constructive critical analysis and the opportunity for facilitated reflection and learning by staff. Some believe this also hampers the national NGOs' ability to be as innovative and boundary-breaking as the better-resourced SOS Sahel UK in the 1990s. An example is SOS Sahel Sudan's project in Red

Sea State, 'Agricultural production by smallholders'. Some aspects of their work were regarded as 'incredibly transformative' by the experienced external evaluator. But there was a missed opportunity in generating and publishing quality evidence about the project's transformational approach that could inform and influence the wider sector (see Box 7).

Box 7   Key findings from the final evaluation of SOS Sahel Sudan's project: 'Agricultural production by smallholders in Red Sea State', 2013–2018

Part of a larger five-year food security programme, funded by the EU, the intended results of this project were:

1. Improved practices and techniques for rain-fed farming.
2. Appropriate inputs and technologies for agricultural production available and used.
3. Increased access to and use of services (financial services, traders, etc.).

The evaluation found that small producers were indeed exposed to a range of new and improved techniques with generally high adoption rates, particularly for fishing. Indeed, the project highlighted the potential of smallholder fisheries for the local economy. Importantly, it overcame scepticism and resistance regarding moving away from a relief approach, especially at community level and with local government, demonstrating that a more developmental approach to supporting small producer livelihoods was viable. The ground-breaking element was 'fostering linkages and a win-win dynamic between small producers and private sector suppliers' (p. 5) through a subsidised voucher scheme. This reversed previously exploitative relations as producers came to be seen as clients by local suppliers, who opened up new outlets as they saw the business opportunities from investing in small producers.

SOS Sahel Sudan's credibility was underpinned by its long involvement in Red Sea State and the trust it had built with local communities and authorities 'who valued the leadership of a national NGO rooted in the local context' (p. 5). However, the evaluation also concluded that 'SOS Sahel sits on a wealth of data that has so far been put to limited use and it should, if it is able, seize the opportunity to find ways to promote greater understanding of producer needs through the production of targeted learning materials' (p. 6).

Source: Plastow, J. and Sahl, I. (2019) *Final evaluation report: agricultural production by smallholders in Red Sea State – Sudan*

To some extent this has relied upon international actors providing the national NGO with the resources and research expertise to write up and disseminate their more innovative work. For example, UNEP supported SOS Sahel Sudan to write up its skilled and sensitive work in demarcating and managing livestock corridors in North and South Kordofan, to reduce conflict between transhumant pastoralists and settled farmers. This critical work began in 2002 and continues to this day (see Box 8).

Policy influencing work by the national NGOs has also taken a backseat. Under SOS Sahel UK this had been closely connected with, and driven by, its action research. The challenges of doing action research as national NGOs has impacted the ability to engage in policy influencing. It can also be highly risky for a national NGO to engage alone in advocacy work. In Mali, Sahel Eco has joined forces with other national and international networks in the Mopti region in a campaign to influence forest law to better promote farmer-managed natural regeneration. In Sudan, the national NGO has been part of projects led by the Feinstein International Center of Tufts University to promote understanding of pastoralist systems of production, joining the Pastoralist Forum in Sudan in around 2012.

With the failure to launch the Sahel Alliance, the national NGOs are no longer able to lead pan-Sahel policy research and influencing. They have been most influential where they have been part of larger international initiatives. To some extent the relationship with IIED has continued. CRAC-GRN and Sahel Eco were both part of IIED's policy-related programme on 'Making decentralisation work', which wound up in 2011. More recently, all four national NGOs have been involved in an IIED study exploring how NRM, and especially how local institutions leading NRM, have evolved over the last 20 years. Sahel Eco has developed a close and important relationship with the INGO Groundswell International,[58] which has an environmental/food security focus. It supports action learning through selected local partners, including Sahel Eco as a member of the Groundswell West Africa Collaborative. This has enabled Sahel Eco, valued by Groundswell International for its strong programme experience, to contribute to a number of briefing papers and case studies on agroecology and resilience in the Sahel. Groundswell has also facilitated Sahel Eco's participation in regional meetings and alliances in West Africa. However, like the other national NGOs, Sahel Eco has not been able to develop its own institutional capacity to document its programme results and the policy implications, although it would like to.

Box 8   SOS Sahel Sudan's innovation and leadership role on livestock corridor management in Kordofan

SOS Sahel UK started working on corridor demarcation in North Kordofan in 2002. As the first attempt to demarcate transhumant livestock routes in the Kordofan region, SOS Sahel engaged a range of community structures, including the pastoralist union, farmer's union, tribal leaders and relevant government departments, with the aim of developing a deeper sense of shared ownership of and responsibility for the natural resource base.

Before expanding this work into South Kordofan in 2007, SOS Sahel carried out an internal evaluation as well as power analysis sessions with targeted communities to understand the impact of the demarcated corridors and thus to learn whether its approach was working. The results were positive in terms of reducing violent conflict, but also revealed significant weaknesses. Women and youth were identified as key players in conflict dynamics but had not been included in conflict resolution mechanisms. Water shortages were also identified as conflict flashpoints along the demarcated routes. This informed the second stage of corridor demarcation, whereby women and youth were actively engaged in community decision-making on NRM and conflict resolution, within both the settled farming community and the pastoralist community. Appropriate entry points to start this work were identified, for example communicating with and gaining permission from traditional leaders. Women and youth committees were then formed, at which point more challenging issues relating to conflict were introduced. Each committee elected a representative to sit on a Peace Committee, thus diversifying its membership beyond traditional tribal elders. Development funds were also invested in developing water infrastructure, paying attention to community-based management of the new water sources and taking account of the impact on pasture and grazing patterns.

On the one hand, SOS Sahel Sudan played an important leadership role with its innovative approach to livestock corridor demarcation, emphasising the importance of paying attention to the process, which can take around six months, with concrete evidence of the positive impact. This approach has since been followed by others, including IFAD. On the other hand, SOS Sahel Sudan's engagement with international organisations such as the Feinstein Center of Tufts University, UNEP and IIED gave the organisation access to wider regional resources to enrich its work. This includes the East Africa pastoralist policy training, adapted to the Sudan context, and regional knowledge of sand dam construction and management, which it introduced to South Kordofan.

Source: Mageed, S.A. (2020) 'Best practice on natural resources management: lessons learnt from SOS Sahel Sudan on livestock corridor management' in *Lessons learned and good practices in natural resource management*. UNEP, pp. 17–22

4.4 Reflections on the current international approach to development, and the implications for localisation

While the national NGOs have been hugely valued by international actors for their deep understanding of the local context and for their relational networks, some of the limitations to what they have been able to do are inherent in the current development model.[59] For example, much donor funding for rural development is now channelled through consortia of development actors, usually led by an INGO and sometimes by a UN agency. The usual practice is to engage national NGOs as subcontracted service providers. The national NGOs are rarely given an equal seat at the consortium table with the INGOs and the donor. In the words of one interviewee with decades of experience in the Sahel, 'this completely undermines the national NGO's ability to occupy the area it should occupy'.

The implications of this power dynamic were one of the reasons SOS Sahel Sudan and SOS Sahel Ethiopia were reluctant to see SOS Sahel UK close. When they needed to work with an INGO, SOS Sahel UK had been their 'INGO of choice' because of the nature of the partnership, which, unusually, put the national NGO in the driving seat. Working through SOS Sahel UK, they also had access to much larger grants than are normally accessible to national NGOs, for example €5 million for the Red Sea State project on smallholder agriculture production. Very rarely are such large grants directly available to national NGOs.

There are significant financial implications of national NGOs being funded almost entirely as implementing partners; tight budgets linked to service delivery only make a small, if any, contribution to overheads. This severely limits their access to unrestricted funding and there are also only very limited opportunities for national NGOs to privately fundraise. This has major consequences for their institutional development and ability to carry risk, for example the financial risk of exchange rate losses. It also limits their ability to adapt and adjust programming, as driven by the community, as per the original SOS Sahel UK model. Staff contracts are dependent on project budgets, making them short-term, and staff may be laid off between projects, as has happened for Sahel Eco. Only if one grant immediately follows another, as has happened for SOS Sahel Sudan in Kordofan, can the same team be kept on board. Without unrestricted funding it is almost impossible to set up communications and advocacy teams that would strengthen the national NGOs' ability to engage in policy influencing. The national NGOs find themselves required to demonstrate to donors that they have the capacity and track record to work to the same international standards as INGOs, but without the same access to, or reliability of, funding. The increasing demands of a compliance-oriented aid system make this an even greater limitation.

The salaries for national NGO staff are almost always lower than the salaries for national staff of international organisations, a state of affairs perpetuated by donor and INGO expectations of budgets submitted by national NGOs as implementing partners. Each of the national NGOs has lost

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59   See also: Barbelet (2019) *Rethinking capacity and complementarity for a more local humanitarian action*. HPG report. London: ODI (https://odi.org/en/publications/rethinking-capacity-and-complementarity-for-a-more-local-humanitarian-action/).

experienced staff to INGOs as a result. This is more acute during periods of economic stress. In the last year, for example, SOS Sahel Sudan lost some of its technical field staff to their international partner working on the same project. This has been a period of deep economic crisis in Sudan with inflation soaring above 100%; against this backdrop it is particularly impressive that the national NGOs have been able to retain a strong cadre of staff. A long-term member of one of the national NGOs summarised the reasons for staff staying, despite the financial disincentives, as:

1. A sense of ownership of, and loyalty to, the national NGO that may be stronger than they would feel to an international organisation.
2. Most of the field staff come from the area where they are working and feel a sense of commitment; that they are helping their families and communities.
3. The sense of 'family', described previously in relation to SOS Sahel International, which has continued since the country programmes nationalised, strongly linked to the highly respected and effective leadership of the national NGOs.

Chapter 5   Conclusions

This paper has told the story of an INGO working in dryland Africa over more than three decades, a period of major change in the Sahel and international engagement with it. The first part of the story depicts how SOS Sahel's participatory approach to NRM evolved, at the time challenging more conventional approaches to development and perceptions of the potential of the drylands. SOS Sahel's approach to development has been a highly relational one, through its model of long-term accompaniment of communities and users of natural resources, and through its engagement with government officers and departments at national and especially subnational levels. Through this approach it successfully overcame many of the limitations of a short-term projectised way of working.

The staff SOS Sahel UK recruited, working to a common set of values, was key to how its approach evolved organically. Yet some of the hallmarks of its way of working were established early on, particularly the commitment to action research and to listening to the people and communities it set out to support. Action research was most effective when carried out in strategic partnerships, for example with IIED, a constructive critical friend with similar values. This, as well as a commitment to regular evaluation, ensured its development approach continued to evolve through questioning and learning.

The second part of the story is of SOS Sahel's journey through creating four national NGOs out of its four main country programmes. This was not about creating a carbon copy of the Northern-headquartered INGO. Instead, it was about creating national organisations rooted in local civil society. This was possible because of the way the country programmes were embedded in each country. But it also had implications for how the transformation process was managed: working with the skills and aspirations of the national NGOs rather than dictating to them. This required staff from the INGO to 'listen carefully to the energy' and to follow that, as described by one staff member.

Although the process of transformation was accelerated by a financial crisis, making it imperative to take a step beyond devolution to establish fully independent national NGOs, it has been largely successful and offers valuable learning. On the one hand, the experience sounds a warning about merger as a way out of financial crisis: this is not a sound basis for exploring strategic alliance between two NGOs. On the other hand, SOS Sahel UK's experience shows the value of its country programmes being firmly rooted in civil society before they became independent NGOs. It also demonstrates the critical role of effective local leadership, and the importance of fostering and supporting that leadership. In the drive towards localisation it is often the management capacity and skills of the national NGO that attract attention and the focus of investment. But as this story demonstrates, such a narrow focus overlooks the organisation's wider institutional capability. The experience of the national NGOs and the struggle some of them faced to develop effective governance structures and reserves demonstrates clearly how these issues must be addressed from the beginning and supported over time.

SOS Sahel UK's experience shows how long it may take to transform a country programme into a national NGO, especially in a hostile political context. There is a fine balance to be struck between getting the job done before the funds run out and working more organically according to the pace and operating context of the national organisation and country concerned. The West Africa NGOs experienced the imperative of the former, while the East Africa NGOs were fortunate to experience a more organic process of transformation.

Above all, the SOS Sahel UK experience illustrates what it means to address inherent and unequal power dynamics between international and national NGOs – a relationship that is often and benevolently labelled as 'partnership', yet in reality can be highly contractual. The process of transformation was about SOS Sahel UK letting go to the point that its financial viability became dependent on funding flows from the national NGOs it supported. In 2020, SOS Sahel UK demonstrated the ultimate manifestation of letting go – closing down, regarding the transformation and localisation process as complete.

SOS Sahel UK's process of localisation and transformation has not all been plain sailing. There is learning to be drawn from its mistakes, for example around communication. However, the fact that the national NGOs are now sought after as 'national partners of choice' by international actors, which in turn puts them in a position of choice, speaks for itself. But there are aspects of the structure, mindset and funding arrangements within the current international aid-funded development model that are still intrinsically weighted against national NGOs fulfilling their potential as equal partners to their international counterparts, despite their greater legitimacy. And there is still much work to be done around rethinking the accompaniment role that international actors can play to national NGOs, to support constructive critical thinking from a place of facilitation rather than contractual management and control.

Appendix   List of acronyms

CDRA   Community Development Resource Association

CRAC-GRN   Cellule de Recherche Action Concertee sur la Gestion des Ressources Naturelles

DDR   disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration

FNC   Forests National Corporation

IIED   International Institute for Environment and Development

INGO   international non-governmental organisation

NGO   non-governmental organisation

NRM   natural resource management

SMCPR   Shared Management of Common Property Resources

SOAS   School of Oriental and African Studies

UNEP   United Nations Environment Programme