

The Local Convention, Governance Tools and Strategy for The Management of Natural and Land Resources in The Rural Commune of Tondikandia, (Tillabéri/ Niger)

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ABSTRACT

In Niger, the management of natural and land resources is the responsibility of the Public Authority through legislative, legal and regulatory instruments such as the rural code, the environmental code, etc. Despite the existence of these instruments, we are witnessing the degradation of natural resources and the recurrence of conflicts over their access, appropriation and use are recurring. The aim of this study is to assess the impact of the Local Convention as a tool for governance and management of natural resources in Tondikandia Commune. The methodology used consisted firstly in diagnosing the natural resources, and then in assessing the relevance of the management rules established by local stakeholders, using a participatory approach, through the management methods established and implemented consensually by local stakeholders. The results of this study reveal a deterioration in the commune natural and land resources. For example, the areas of tiger bush and shrub steppe, which were respectively 4.68% and 44.19% of the land-use area in 1993, have shrunk to 2.20% and 31.56% in 2013, while cultivated areas have increased from 14.03% to 29.66%. This situation is further exacerbated by demographic growth, combined with the effects of climate change, whose impacts include a decline in productive potential, the disarticulation of production systems and conflicts over access to natural resources. With decentralization, local stakeholders are involved in planning their local development through the Communal Development Plan. Some communes in Niger have recently adopted the Local Convention as a tool for managing natural resources, including Tondikandia, where it has had an impact in reducing community conflicts and restoring biodiversity. In fact, natural resources that were in decline between 1993 and 2013 have been restored, notably tiger bush and shrub steppe, which represent 2.23% and 31.62% respectively of the total area in 2023. As a result, the Local Convention approach is seen as a mechanism for sustainable management of communal natural resources.

Keywords: Local convention, Sustainable management, Natural resource, Tondikandia, Niger.

INTRODUCTION

In the Sahel, Local Conventions have proliferated over the past two decades, and are presented as promising alternatives for the participatory management of natural and land resources. Historically, the State was responsible for the exclusive management of natural resources, through legal and institutional arrangements (GRANIER, L.,2010). However, the inadequacy of the legal and regulatory texts governing the management of these resources has shown their limitations and encouraged over-exploitation and the multiplication of conflicts, with the weakening or even destruction of existing regulatory rules. As a result, the coexistence of deeply-rooted customary resource management practices and the regulatory provisions of the rural and

forestry codes was often conflictual. Faced with these facts, the principle of local, decentralized management is increasingly put forward, but it is not self-evident, and the conditions under which local management is possible are rarely spelled out. Thus, the increasingly widespread adoption of participatory natural resource management, together with the reaffirmed option for effective implementation of decentralization, offered real opportunities for greater community involvement in natural resource management (LAVIGNE DELVILLE, Ph.,2009). Local conventions in the Sahel emerged in the wake of a context of weakening ecological conditions and deregulation of social systems, to which must be added an economic environment in the process of impoverishment. However, there is no watertight boundary between the natural resource management referents of local populations and those of the state and its agencies (IIED Sahel, 2003). What these “negotiated” local management practices have in common is that they reinvigorate traditional regulatory mechanisms based on consultation, while at the same time providing new technical tools that can be reproduced from one locality to another (GRANIER, L.,2006). In this respect, in the 1960s, newly independent African states made control of these resources an essential pillar of national construction and socio-economic development, even if criticism was levelled at centralized systems incapable of curbing such processes (LAVIGNE DELVILLE, Ph., & al,2000). Thus, from “the failure of state management of renewable resources”, we have moved on to “the need for local management of renewable resources”, with many authors advocating increased decentralization of natural and environmental resources (WADE, R.,1987, BERTRAND, A.,1998, ROCHEGUDE, A.,1998; VINCENT, P.,1998; RIBOT, C.J.,2003).

Indeed, the empowerment and participation of local stakeholders are not effective (LAWRY, S.W., 1989, in TOURE, E.H.,2011), just as land tenure security is far from assured, or equitable access to resources remains problematic for some stakeholders, as long as the duality between government legislation and customary rights is maintained. In the face of these many challenges facing farmers and, above all, their decentralized bodies, local conventions appear to be the most appropriate response for strengthening local governance (CILSS.,2003; COMPAGNON, D.&CONSTANTIN, F., 2000).

In Niger, the management of natural resources is primarily the prerogative of the Public Authority, through legal and institutional frameworks governed by legal texts and regulations (Constitution, Rural Code, Forestry Code, various decrees and orders), the application of which is often poorly perceived by rural stakeholders, because despite these provisions, forestry and land resources continue to deteriorate.

In Niger, several development projects support communities in restoring degraded land and protecting the environment, notably by setting up village management committees. However, these committees establish rules of protection that are often not fully in line with the relevant legislation. Nowadays, in view of the dwindling natural and land resources and the need for better management of these resources, local communities are concerned about the extent of their degradation, and there is a clear desire to restore, preserve and sustainably manage them through management rules devised locally by the various stakeholders.

Like other communes in Niger, Tondikandia natural and land resources are becoming less and less productive for both agriculture and livestock farming, the two mainstays of the commune economy. This situation is also exacerbated by the negative impacts of climate change (more frequent droughts and floods, wind and water erosion), combined with an ever-growing population, which increases competition for natural resources between the various rural stakeholders.

In Niger, the de Tondikandia Rural Commune is a pioneer in the design and application of Local Conventions, as part of the Sahel resilience-building initiative supported by the USAID-funded REGIS-ER (Resilience and Economic Growth in the Sahel-Resilience Reinforced) Project, which operated in Niger and Burkina Faso.

In this commune, the fundamental basis underpinning the Local Convention (LC) is to help this administrative entity and the local population to put in place mechanisms for the prevention and management of conflicts linked to access to community natural resources, as well as the sustainable management of these resources.

In fact, the natural and land resources of Tondikandia Commune are subject to over-exploitation due to demographic pressure and the absence of codified local management rules, combined with the adverse effects of climate change. It was against this backdrop that the commune of Tondikandia and the REGIS-ER Project signed a partnership agreement in 2013, enabling the Project to help the commune draw up a Local Convention. This This includes support for the creation of a Communal Land-use and Allocation Plans (COLAP) and local rules for managing community natural resources, which in reality are a decision-making tool for the administrative and customary authorities. This (tool) must be an integral part of the Communal Development Plan (CDP), but also serve as a considerable asset in the realization of the Tondikandia Communal Development Scheme, which the Town Hall is required to draw up.

The development of the Local Convention for this commune is part of this process, in consultation with all the stakeholders concerned, in particular the beneficiary populations, communal authorities and government technical services, etc. The aim of this study is therefore to assess the impact of the Local Convention as a tool for governance and natural resource management in the Tondikandia commune. The aim of this study is therefore to assess the impact of the Local Convention as a tool for governance and natural resource management in the Tondikandia commune.

PRESENTATION OF THE STUDY AREA

Location of Tondikandia commune

The rural commune of Tondikandia is located in Tillabéri region of western Niger. With a space area of around 2,279.85 km², and includes 141 administrative villages spread across the 6 sub-zones, established by the commune, for a population estimated at 108,991 inhabitants in the fourth General Population and Housing Census of 2012. Like other rural communes in Niger, agriculture and livestock farming are the main socio-economic activities of the population of Tondikandia commune, due to their contributions to food security, resilience and household economic development.

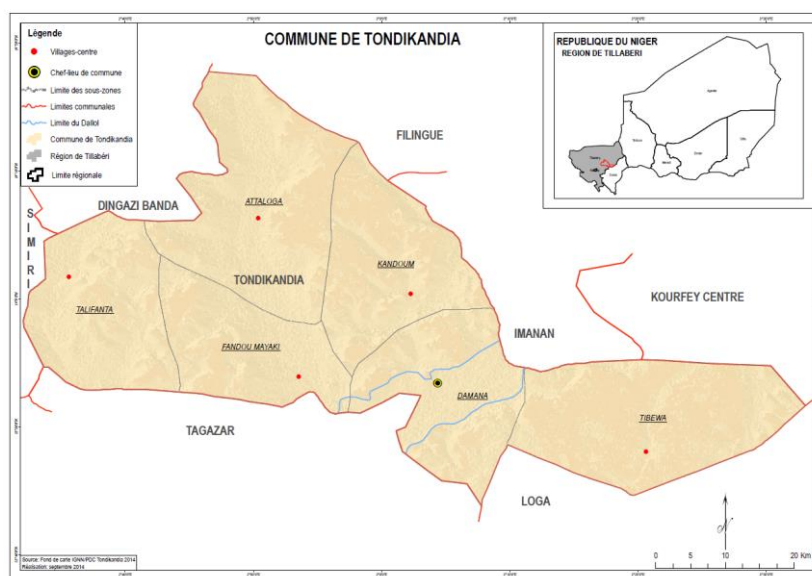


Figure No1: Tondikandia location map

The climate

The commune climate is of the Sahelian type, which exposes it, like the rest of the country, to the effects of climate change and variability, to which are added inter-annual variability and attacks on crops, making agricultural production uncertain and impacting natural resources with all the consequences that follow (reduced biodiversity, resource-related conflicts, flooding, drought, etc.).

Geomorphology and hydrography

The geomorphology of the Tondikandia commune is made up of four types of landscape units of varying proportions, namely plateaus (characterized by ferruginous soil), glacis, watersheds, the dallol zone and lowlands. In terms of hydrography, the commune has surface water resources consisting of some twenty ponds, six of which are permanent, and semi-permanent ponds in the central and western parts of the commune.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In the context of this study, the methodology used consisted firstly in diagnosing the natural resources, as well as the constraints linked to them in terms of their sustainable management. This diagnosis was primarily carried out by the commune in 2013, with the support of partners, as part of the process of drawing up its local natural resources management agreement. As part of this work, an update of the diagnosis was carried out, notably with the support of the commune. To this end, tools were developed to collect and verify the necessary information in the field, in particular through structured interviews with certain key players in the commune (town hall, decentralized technical services, representatives of sub-zone committees, etc.) to assess the impact of the Local Convention in the management of community natural resources.

In all, some forty rural stakeholders, including village chiefs and representatives of sub-zone committees, were interviewed, mainly about natural resource management, customary rural conflict prevention and management procedures, the impact of the implementation of the Local Convention, and so on. The individual and focus group interviews were conducted according to a categorization of stakeholders, drawn up with the support of the commune. This categorization is based on criteria such as the level of involvement of stakeholders in the management of community natural resources and in the implementation of the Local Convention in the commune of Tondikandia, security conditions for access to certain areas of the commune, socio-economic activities linked to the exploitation of natural resources and the availability of these resources, etc.

Investigations took place in Fandou Mayaki, Damana, Kandoum and Tibéwa sub-zones, where security conditions are not restrictive. Discussions with the mayor's office, decentralized communal technical services

and the Communal Land Commission (Cofocom) focused on the same themes, as did their assessments of the impact of the Local Convention as a tool for governance and natural resource management in the commune of Tondikandia, for the prevention and resolution of rural conflicts, as well as the sustainable management of natural resources. The use of Landsat satellite images from 1993, 2003, 2013 and 2023 enabled us to carry out a diachronic monitoring of the state of natural resources, in order to understand their evolution during these reference periods, on the one hand, and to draw up the Communal Land-use and Allocation Plans (COLAP), the second pillar of the Local Convention, on the other.

This study is therefore based, on the one hand, on the analysis of bibliographical data, such as that used in the diagnosis to highlight the commune's natural resource potential and the constraints linked to their management, the social and institutional framework, etc., and, on the other, on interviews with the various stakeholders, field observations and the interpretation of satellite imagery. On the other hand, interviews were conducted with the various stakeholders, field observations were made and satellite imagery was interpreted. An assessment was then made of the relevance of the Natural Resource Management Rules (second pillar of the Local Convention), based on field information.

RESULTS

Drawing up the Local Convention

What is a Local Convention?

According to the existing literature, a Local Convention can be defined as a consensual document drawn up by one or more Rural Communes with a view to managing natural resources sustainably, adapting to climate change and preventing conflicts.

A Local Convention (LC) is therefore a set of provisions, standards and local rules determining access to and use of natural resources in a given area, as well as the sanctions decided in the event of abuse. The aim is to better manage natural resources in order to avoid conflicts linked to their use, and to preserve them for future generations.

Indeed, local agreements raise the issue of comprehensive natural resource management, taking into account both practical and organizational conditions. In this sense, they (Local Conventions) represent a tool and a local strategy for making natural resource management more effective, despite the complexity of taking into account the diversity of stakeholders involved, and the integrated responses to be provided to environmental, social, cultural and other dimensions. For this reason, the elaboration of the Local Convention for the management of natural resources involves a series of stages, notably the participatory diagnosis of the commune's natural resources, the production of basic thematic maps, and the participatory formulation of Community Management Rules (CMR). This is followed by the restitution, validation and adoption of the Local Agreement, and then the deliberation and approval of the Local Agreement, with signature by the administrative authorities to give it legal force. Once these stages have been completed, implementation and monitoring remain the prerogative of the rural communities. This would provide rural stakeholders with a tool for concerted management and regulated use of natural resources and community land.

The Communal Land use and Allocation Plan (COLAP)

A diachronic analysis of satellite images from 1993, 2003, 2013 and 2023 shows the evolution of natural and land resources in Tondikandia commune, before and after the implementation of the Local Convention. The thematic maps thus produced provide local stakeholders with a panoramic view of land use, enabling them to make the appropriate decisions within the framework of the Communal Development Plan (CDP), notably with regard to zoning and the assignment of vocation to the various landscape units. To this end, in addition to participatory mapping, satellite-based mapping features a legend in local languages to facilitate reading and understanding of thematic mapping. In this way, the statistics on natural resources and land inherent in the thematic maps constitute a fundamental basis of data that can support the communal development plan. Moreover, the COLAP is perceived by local stakeholders as a fundamental tool of the Local Convention, as it addresses their concerns regarding the management of natural resources and community land on all fronts, and all management rules are defined by these same stakeholders at grassroots level. In short, the COLAP has made a major contribution to the control of the spatial dynamics of the commune's natural and land resources by the decision-makers and local communities of the Tondikandia commune. Thanks to the COLAP, the community now has not only information, but also a concrete basis for formulating sustainable resource management rules. The sub-zoning, carried out using a participatory approach, has enabled the community to orient its vision of communal development in general, and of the terroir (sub-zone) in particular.

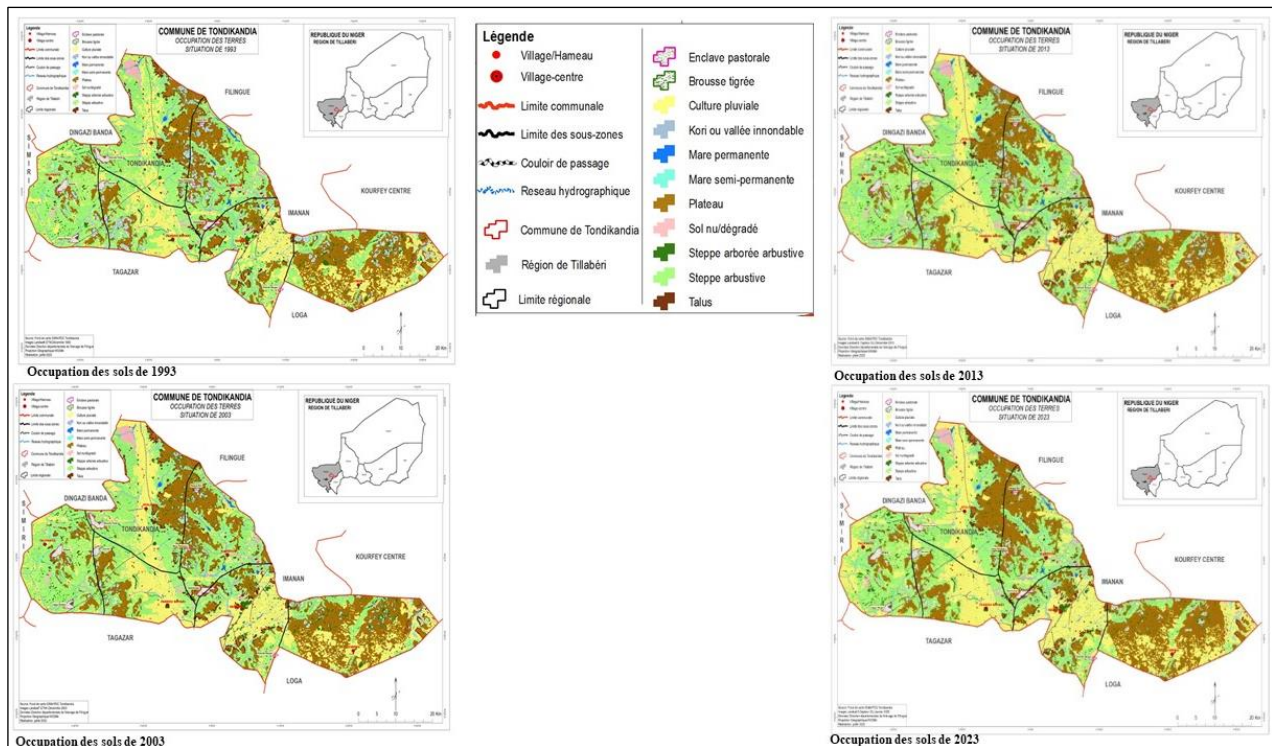


Figure No2: Land use maps for 1993, 2003, 2013 and 2023

The flora and vegetation

The vegetation of Tondikandia commune is a stratified shrub steppe. The woody stratum is made up of shrubs, mainly *Guiera senegalensis* and *Boscia senegalensis*, interspersed with a few trees, dominated by thorny plants such as *Faidherbia albida*, *Balanites aegyptiaca*, *Ziziphus mauritiana*, *Piliostigma reticulatum*, *Bauhinia rufescens* and *Sclerocarya birrea*. The herbaceous layer is dominated by annuals such as *Eragrostis tremula*, *Cenchrus biflorus*, *Alysicarpus ovalifolius* and others.

Nowadays, however, this vegetation has been severely degraded by the aridity of the climate against a backdrop of change/variability, with high risks of drought and, above all, strong anthropic pressure on natural resources (DADT, 2003, PDC Tondikandia, 2015).

The wildlife

In the commune of Tondikandia, the terrestrial fauna is currently not very abundant or diverse.

Indeed, only giraffes (*Giraffa camelopardalis*), hyenas (*Hyaenidae*), small mammals such as Squirrels (*Sciurus vulgaris*), Hares (*Lepus sp*), Gazelles (*Gazella dorcas*), Lynx (*Lynx rufus*), Jackal (*Canis aureus*), Fox (*Vulpes vulpes*), Duiker and a few birds (Heron guards, Ravens and granivorous birds, Guinea fowl). Giraffes can often be seen in the central and northern strips of the commune, and are an element in the development of ecotourism for the commune, as these giraffes seem to benefit from exceptional protection by the communal actors. There are also reptiles such as the tapered maw, the varan and the snake. In addition, the existence of a large number of semi-permanent and permanent ponds encourages the development of fish farming, particularly in the Kandoum pond, although the species cultivated are not very diverse. *Clarias lazera* (catfish) and *Tilapia Sp* are the two main species. Poaching, an arid climate and the destruction of wildlife habitats are the main causes of the rarefaction and even disappearance of certain animal species (Diagnostic Convention Locale, 2014; PDC Tondikandia, 2015; field data, 2023).

Conflict management mechanisms linked to the exploitation of natural resources

During the various diagnoses, several types of conflict were identified, the most recurrent of which are those between farmers and herders, between farmers themselves and between herders and other herders. There are also other types of conflict, notably between fishermen, between fishermen and herders, and between woodcutters and farmers. The diagnoses also highlight conflict situations between woodcutters and livestock farmers, between the latter and straw pickers, and conflicts between wildlife and farmers.

Traditionally, the majority of rural conflicts are settled amicably between the conflicting actors, at the level of customary leaders (district chief, village chief or canton chief, groupement chief, etc.), generally by conciliation. However, disputes that go beyond conciliation are referred to the Basic Land Commission (for sub-zones that have one), then to the Communal Commission (Cofocom), and beyond to the courts. In this respect, the problem of state management of natural resources, which does not enjoy the support of the population, is largely resolved through the Local Convention, with the collaboration of the decentralized technical services, the commune and the local actors.

IMPACTS OF THE LOCAL CONVENTION

Since its implementation in 2014, the impact of the local convention in the Tondikandia commune has been perceptible through various aspects, including legal, environmental socio-anthropological, etc.

Strengthening social cohesion

The implementation of the local convention is followed by that of the monitoring framework, through the operational instruments of natural resource management at local level, namely the sub-zone committees. These committees play the role of local regulators of natural resource management by implementing and disseminating the Local Convention. This has helped to strengthen social cohesion within the Tondikandia commune, given the very composition of these committees, set up according to a process of inclusion and representation of rural stakeholders at grassroots level.

Indeed, the various sub-zones of the Tondikandia commune are increasingly working together in the process of effectively implementing the Local Convention, with a view to resolving disputes between rural stakeholders over the use of shared natural and community land resources. This reinforces social cohesion, which is a fundamental parameter in the elaboration and implementation of the Local Convention, especially as it takes into account local habits, customs and knowledge.

Between 2013 and 2014, twelve (12) conflicts were settled by conciliations of the chef de Canton within the framework of disputes linked to the use of agricultural land, not counting those (conflicts) settled at village, camp and group level by customary chiefs and those that were referred to the Filingué justice system. Indeed, since the effective implementation of the Local Convention, the number of rural conflicts linked to access to and use of natural and land resources has fallen by more than 76% in the commune, with variability at the level of each sub-zone.

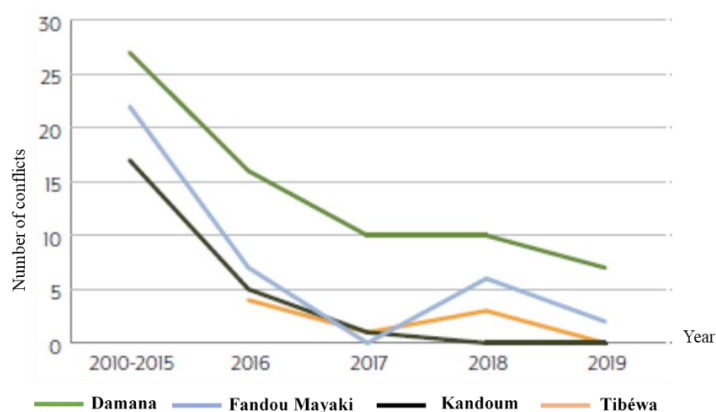


Figure No3: Evolution of rural conflicts in the commune of Tondikandia

The domino effect in other communes

Since the implementation of the Tondikandia Local Convention in 2014, and especially its impact, four years later (2018) the neighboring communes of Imanane and Tagazar with similar problems have adopted their Local Conventions for natural resource management. What's more, other communes in the Tillabéri region, such as Kourtheye and Sakoira, have also followed suit. This shows the importance of this tool in the management of community natural resources, based on rules established by the players themselves.

Restoring biodiversity and improving local economic conditions

In the Tondikandia commune, since its implementation and appropriation by local communities in 2014, the Local Convention has made it possible to reconcile the exploitation, protection, preservation and restoration of natural and land resources. The most visible impact is the gradual restoration of certain landscape units, which can be appreciated through a diachronic analysis of satellite images from 1993, 2003, 2013 and 2023, i.e. before and after the implementation of the Local Convention. For example, tiger bush and shrub steppe, which respectively represented 4.68% and 44.19% of the land-use area in 1993, have shrunk to 2.20% and 31.56% in 2013, while cultivated areas have increased from 14.03% to 29.66%. In 2023, these land use units have regenerated slightly to cover 2.23%, and 31.62% of the total area respectively. The same applies to shrub-tree steppe, which has regressed from 1.87% in 1993 to 1.47% in 2013, plus 1.47% in 2023.

On the other hand, arable land is still on the increase, due in part to the growing population of the commune, and in part to the facilities offered by the Local Agreement for regulatory access to land resources. They represent 14.03% in 1993, 29.66% in 2013 and 29.76% in 2023. In addition, the local convention has enabled the conservation of certain plant species that have become rare over the decades, and whose recovery could contribute to the development of pharmacopoeia and thus constitute an instrument in the fight against poverty in rural areas, thanks to the economic spin-offs this could generate.

Field investigations have also revealed that the fauna (gazelle, guinea fowl, small rodents, etc.), which was in sharp decline before the adoption of the Local Convention, has begun to abound in places, following awareness-raising and the rules laid down by this tool for its exploitation. The regulation of fishing in certain developed water bodies, including the Kandoum reservoir, has contributed to the development of fish farming by the communities, helping to develop the local economy and improve dietary conditions.

Table No. 1: Stock removal rate in (%)

Land use units	1993	2003	2013	2023
	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage	Percentage
Tiger Bush	4,683	3,725	2,205	2,231
Rainfed cultivation	14,032	18,702	29,663	29,769
Kori or flood valley	2,388	2,388	2,388	2,388
Permanent pond	0,311	0,284	0,275	0,246
Semi-permanent pond	1,057	0,926	0,908	0,911
Plateau	27,758	27,758	27,758	27,758
Bare soil	1,882	1,934	1,941	1,766
Shrubby wooded steppe	1,874	1,827	1,478	1,479
Shrub steppe	44,191	40,631	31,560	31,628
Slope	1,824	1,824	1,824	1,824
Total	100,000	100,000	100,000	100,000

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In summary, in Tondikandia commune, the Local Convention (LC) for natural resource management represents a promising alternative for the participative, decentralized and sustainable management of community natural resources. Indeed, several studies support the need for concerted management of natural resources, given the failure of state systems and the inability of local elected representatives to regulate pressure on these resources (BANZHAF, M.,2005; TALL, S.M. & GUEYE, M.B.,2003; DJIRE, M., 2003; KONATE, Y., 2001; CTA.,1998). Authors such as OSTROM, E.,1990, FREUDENBERGER, M.S.,1992 & PLATTEAU, J.-P., 2000, even suggest that securing natural and land resources requires taking into account the opinions of local communities, i.e. exploiting their resources through rules negotiated and established by them.

Resulting from a concerted process in its elaboration and implementation, it (Conventions Locale) is a governance tool and a strategy for managing local natural and land resources for Tondikandia commune. Indeed, studies carried out in the Sahel support the thesis that local conventions, analyzed according to a programmatic approach, are perceived as an alternative to the modes of regulation hitherto in place (HILHORST, T. & COULIBALY, A.,1998), in Senegal (CISSE, G., 2004), in Niger (BACHIR, A., &al, 2007), in Burkina Faso (IED.,2009).

Since its implementation in 2014, significant changes in terms of reducing rural conflicts, securing land tenure, restoring biodiversity, strengthening social cohesion between rural communities among others have been observed in the Tondikandia commune. In addition to their involvement, rural stakeholders have taken relative ownership of this Local Convention for the management of natural resources.

However, in Tondikandia commune, there is a need to step up community awareness-raising and the dissemination of this tool, as its implementation often encounters difficulties among certain users of shared community resources, indicating a partial appropriation of the rules of concerted management. The success of the Local Convention in this commune also depends on the involvement of the various stakeholders, taking into account their sometimes divergent interests. This is an obstacle to the effective implementation of the Local Convention in the commune. This is in line with certain studies (OSTROM, E.,1990; JANSEN, M. A. & OSTROM, E., 2001), which show that local conventions do not always obey a logic of social justice, but that actors can adhere to collective resource management rules if they consider them fair or legitimate (RIBOT, C.J., 2009; LUND, C., 2006). In fact, these negotiated practices face implementation difficulties attributable to a lack of legitimacy, resources and monitoring (DJIRE, M. & DICKO, A.K., 2007).

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