

RESEARCH AND TRAINING FOR COOPERATION IN SUB SAHARAN AFRICA: THE POLITECNICO DI TORINO MASTER *PLANS ET PROJETS POUR LES VILLES DU TIERS MONDE*.

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ABSTRACT

The Master *Plans et projets pour les villes du Tiers Monde*, answers the demand for the knowledge and training required to strengthen public institutions and good governance in the countries of the Sahel in sub-Saharan Africa. The first section specifies the foreword and the structure of the Master program's. The conclusion reflects on the accomplishments of the first five cycles.

Foreword

In developing countries, the weakness of public institutions, especially on the local level, has been identified as one of the main factors that hinder the effectiveness of public development aid. With this in mind, Italian foreign policy has been involving its own local institutions in international aid policies aimed at strengthening the technical and administrative potential of institutions in developing countries. Such an effort, termed *decentralized cooperation*, draws on the technical services of cities, provinces, and regions in Italy. These make their experiences available with the stipulation that Italian officials learn about the institutions, problems and conditions of the countries they are working with. This is therefore the frame of reference of the Masters program *Plan et projets pour les villes du Tiers Monde* at Politecnico di Torino. The program aims to give scientific and technical support to courses geared to answering the demand for the training of public officials in the local administrations of the Sahelian Region in Sub-Saharan Africa.

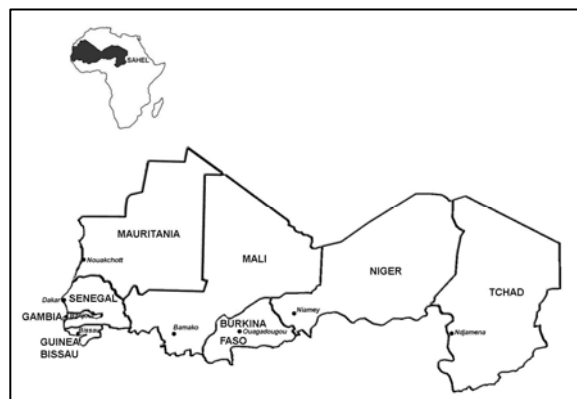
In its first five cycles (2004-09), the Masters program trained public officials from city governments and local institutions in Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso. This program reflects the attention that Italian foreign policy is focusing on these countries, which are considered to be in the first lines of action for bilateral cooperation. However, the next cycles of the Masters program are likely to involve others countries of the Region.

Institutional strengthening and good governance in Sahelian countries

Administrative decentralization and the struggle against poverty are interrelated issues in sub-Saharan Africa and the countries of the Sahelian region (fig.1). Decentralization has probably been the most important institutional reform from the time of

independence to the present and poverty has been the most important emergency.

Figure.1
Sahelian Region in Sub-Saharan Africa



Source: Map elaborated by the Author

The institution of city governments and local administrations is a recent phenomenon in the countries of the Sahel. These local administrations stem out of an increasing concentration on processes of local democratization, which is based on recent reforms that attempt to decentralize public policies by instituting local public administrations. There is a concerted effort here to make these administrations able to perform the tasks assigned to them and thus favor forms of local good governance. Such an effort grows out of the experiences of multi-bilateral cooperation agencies. In fact, the World Bank, United Nations agencies, and national cooperative institutions all point to the weakness of local institutions as one of the chief obstacles to the effectiveness of international policies of developmental aid.

This is the context that worked towards the administrative reform leading to the first municipal elections held over the last ten years in Niger,

Burkina Faso, and Mali: the three target countries of the Masters program, countries whose young institutions testify to a wide gap between the tasks assigned to them and the resources that they are able to exploit in view of their conditions of poverty.

Therefore the scientific research and the educational activities of the Masters program in *Plans et projets pour les villes du Tiers Monde* take on the two-fold task of acquiring a knowledge of local conditions and training for the strengthening of good governance and planning of Sahelian public administrations.

Research

The research conducted in the three countries of the Masters participants started off with the examination of the administrative organizations and the planning tasks mandated to the city governments through the laws of administrative decentralization. After this was established, these mandates were put up against the real financial, technical and administrative potential available to local administrations, made known through direct investigations and interviews. The researchers identified the main obstacles that these administrations faced in reference to programming and planning for local development.

The results of the research were published in a monograph [1] that pointed out the limits of the administrative and technical services, something that can be summed up as *structural weakness*. Namely, the bases needed for planning, such as demographic information and surveys of the territory, were scarcely known. Technical problems were hindering the preparation of plans and the programming of projects. There was a lack in the numbers of the personnel and, often, in the technical-administrative backgrounds of the personnel. The relationships that were problematic were identified, often those between the local levels (city and departmental governments) and central governments (the ministries that were working in the territory through plans focused on specific competencies). These problems were also studied in the light of the experiences of international good governance policies in the region that have identified rural and middle-sized cities as the areas of particular institutional weakness.

Nevertheless, further research was conducted focusing on identifying what the technical priorities for local planning were: priorities such as the state of urban hygiene, the precariousness of natural resources, the accelerated urbanization on areas of agricultural production, and the consequent experiences with land-use planning and soil-consumption monitoring. Hence this is the store of knowledge that Masters degree education program is based upon.

The educational practices

Target groups.

In its first five cycles 40 participants were awarded Masters degrees: 20 from Niger, 10 from Burkina Faso and 10 from Mali. They are all administrators and public officials selected in collaboration with the technical units of local Italian bilateral-cooperation agencies and with the local offices of the United Nations Development Program. Candidates were selected from city governments or local institutions (tab.1) where Italian bilateral cooperation and the UNDP are involved with their own programs aimed at strengthening local public good governance. Further, the selection of Masters participants coordinated with the technical offices of UNDP and Italian cooperation was done in such a way as to choose several officials from each administrative unit. In this way, there can be a rotation of fresh participants from various units in future cycles, thus guaranteeing continuous cycles of training development.

Program structure.

The Master program lasts eight months. The presence of active public administrators made it necessary to minimize their periods of absence from their respective services. For this reason, the program – conducted entirely in French – was set up in three parts, each one corresponding to a training module (tab 2).

Table 2
Master training modules.

Module	Training	Activities
1 st : three months	e-learning	Report documentation
2 nd : three months	Classroom, stages and workshops	Seminars, lessons, stages
3 rd : three months	e-learning	Report and results

Source: Author

The first module lasts three months and is conducted through long-distance learning. Using the simple instrument of e-learning, each participant writes a brief two-part report that, in the first part, describes the structures and functions of the administrations where the participant is working; in the second part, the report points out the main technical and administrative problems that the administration encounters when performing its assigned tasks. The reports are discussed with public officials and technicians from the Italian local administrators who collaborate on the Masters program. In this way, they are made aware of the problems that the Sahelian participants point out. Consequently, they can evaluate their potential implications in light of Italian administrative experience. In fact, this is one of the objectives of the Masters program. The following are just some of the concrete examples of the problems pointed out by the Sahelian participants: scarce information about the

demographic and socio-economic conditions required for drafting realistic local-development plans; the need for planning for the safeguarding and enhancement of natural resources as well as for a control on urbanization; and technical shortcomings in the use of the tools for surveying and planning of the surface areas -- i.e. the GIS system and its implications for land-use planning as well as administrative procedures for budgeting public services.

The second module lasts three weeks and is held in Italy at Turin Polytechnic University. The program is articulated into classes, workshops, and seminars. The topics covered are 1) planning on all scales; 2) the methods and procedures of international cooperation on three levels – international, national, and local; and 3) the organizations of the participants' respective institutions and technical services. Specific modules cover topics of particular interest for the Sahelian public officers and that are organized by experts from the Turin Polytechnic (rather than those from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs or from multi-bilateral organizations) (fig.2). For example, there is a course that covers land use planning and management, GIS systems, public policies, and cooperation procedures.

Figure 2.
Classroom lesson.



Source: The Author

Italian administrators are involved directly in this phase. They interact with their Sahelian colleagues in order to find out how each other's technical services function and how they could identify possible areas of collaboration. (fig.3). At the end of this phase, each participant prepares a report on the knowledge he or she has acquired and on proposals for potential decentralized cooperation programs aimed at strengthening institutions.

The third module lasts two weeks and is conducted through long-distance learning. The participants complete their reports and present the results of the course in a final seminar organized at Niamey (Niger) and directly involving local governments, multi-bilateral cooperation agencies and international diplomatic representatives (fig.4).

Figure 3.
Stage: Italian and Sahelian public officers



Source: The Author

Figure 4.
Graduation ceremony with Italian diplomatic authorities in Niamey, Niger.



Source: The Author

Concluding Remarks

Good governance in the form of strengthening institutions (as the term is generally used) is such a complex issue that we need a moderate-to-long period of time in order to make any precise estimate of its progress. With this reservation in mind, we can already point out three features of the originality of the Masters program and its results: the usefulness of the research for Italian administrators; the contribution to Sahelian administrations; and the benefits that the Masters-program participants pointed out themselves.

Firstly, the research that makes up the scientific support of the Masters program provides the knowledge needed to set up the educational practices of such a specialized program. In addition, it provides indications that Italian administrations find useful when they are programming cooperation proposals in Sahelian countries. In fact, their proposals cannot be traced back to the drafting of a Master plan but to something else – i.e. the experience that an Italian city government can give to

Sahelian administrators in overcoming the problems they are facing today in view of their conditions of extreme poverty. This is one of the most original aspects of the Masters program but it is also one of its biggest challenges.

Secondly, the Masters program contributes to the benefit of its Sahelian participants. In it they have the opportunity to learn how Italian local administrations manage key issues such as local financing, the planning of surface resources, the enhancement of natural resources, and the organization of basic services. In addition, they acquire information useful for identifying possible areas of collaboration. In fact, after completing their Masters programs, Sahelian graduates drafted cooperation projects in the following areas: collaboration for the strengthening of demographic services in view of enhancing planning capabilities; the exchange of experiences with procedures of real estate management, urban planning and territorial planning; and the examination of budgeting methods as well as of surface-surveying methods through GIS systems. Today, it is on the record that some of these projects were co-financed after the Masters program.

Thirdly, Sahelian Masters program graduates have been able to advance in their careers. They have testified to benefits they gained in relation to development agencies and, above all, in relation to Italian administrations. Such results were made possible through the direct engagement of local officials of Italian cooperating agencies and of the UNDP.

In conclusion, the Masters degree program is designed to encourage mutual cooperation between local administrations in Italy and the countries in the Sahel region. Here cooperation is not a question of transferring goods or services from one country to another, but a focus on building the kind of relationships that can lead to a shared awareness of the problems faced by Italian and Sahelian administrations and of the resources available to them, thus setting the stage for decentralized cooperation among local agencies. This objective is so important that it should lead to further research and to subsequent training activities that should expand the target area to the other counties of the region. This is therefore the future development of this research.

The Masters program is jointly funded by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Piedmont Region, the Province and City of Torino, and the Compagnia di San Paolo. It is managed by COREP, a training organization certified to European UNI EN ISO 9001:2000 for the design and delivery of educational services by AFAQ Ascet International.

References

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