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Maria Brockhaus
CIFOR scientist

The village of Teli in Mali.
Photo by Daniel Tiveau

A brush fire in Mali.
Photo by Christian Cossalter

Adapting to change in northern Mali

In northern Mali, droughts and famines have occurred throughout history, and the local people are used to hardship. This may explain why they have adapted with some success to the changing climate over recent years. However, the political and administrative systems in the country lag behind, and have yet to adapt their planning and development policies to climate change. This is one of the findings of a study conducted under the TroFCCA project. See http://www.cifor.cgiar.org/publications/pdf_files/Infobrief/019-infobrief.pdf.

The study looked at how local communities were adapting to climate change in two villages to the north of Lake Faguibine, near Timbuktu. At one time, the local economies flourished: fish were plentiful and local people cultivated wheat and barley on the rich soil surrounding the lake. But in the 1970s and 1980s, droughts became more frequent, and rainfall less plentiful. Now, over a quarter of the area that was formerly under water is covered by an indigenous tree, *Acacia,* and an introduced species, *Prosopis*. A development project established the latter in the 1980s to protect the lake shore from the effects of drought. *Prosopis* trees have spread across a wider area than *Acacia* trees have.

The researchers undertook fieldwork between July and October 2008. They began by conducting a 10-day biophysical survey, during which they explained to local people precisely what they hoped to achieve. The survey was followed by a series of workshops to establish how the villagers had adapted, or failed to adapt, to the changing climate and environment.

'At first,' says CIFOR scientist Maria Brockhaus, 'they were telling us what a nightmare the *Prosopis* forest was.'

Some complained that it was so dense they would lose their animals there—and possibly their lives. Others said that the species had taken over land once used for cultivation and fisheries. However, a dissenting view began to emerge. Some of the villagers pointed out that during the recent drought their animals had only been able to survive because of the fodder provided by *Prosopis*; others said that they had used the timber to make charcoal.

'Then they began to laugh and assess what they'd been saying,' says Brockhaus. 'They realised they were always complaining about the *Prosopis,* but they had actually identified more benefits than disadvantages. What's more, they had successfully adapted to the changing environment.'

The same could not be said for either local or central governments. Brockhaus and her colleague Houria Djoudi discovered that a planned development project, designed to cut new water channels around the fringes of Lake Faguibine, could have a profound influence on the environment, yet the plans at the time of research did not take into account the ways in which local people and the ecosystem had already adapted to climate change. There were no plans to manage the local resources sustainably, neither could the researchers identify any technical support from government bodies. In short, the adaptation efforts of the local population seemed to be entirely disconnected from higher-scale planning and decision making.

'This is a good illustration of why it is so important to mainstream adaptation into national policy making,' says Brockhaus.