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“Resilience of agricultural systems against crises”

Irrigated Agriculture in Niger: Which Strategy to Adopt Against Food Crises and Poverty?

NOUHOU ALI

Karlsruhe Institute of Technology (KIT), Institute of Regional Science and Spatial Planning (IfR), Germany

Abstract

One of the most vulnerable ecosystems of the African continent is situated in the Sahel. Shaken by repeating food crises, the Sahel suffers from the devastating consequences of climate change and population pressure. Precipitations are irregularly distributed as to their spatial and temporal occurrence, the Sahara Desert expands inexorably, cropping soils turn more and more barren every year, the climate refuges move to the country's south where the annual demographic growth attains 3.6 % in some communes. Given this staggering situation, the Nigerien peasants have followed the lead of other peasants of the Sahel and chose to intensify the cultivation by irrigating crops around water courses, fountains and pools to compensate the lack of food. Since three decades, however, this practice has under achieved the peasant's expectations. Actually, the husbandry techniques are still archaic and the products are not competitive with imported goods, moreover the consumers' skepticism is rampant. Additionally, the lobbying practice of the grocery merchants contributes to the precarious situation of the agricultural producers. The state which has been attempting to valorize these agricultural systems through several support schemes is faced with the precariousness of the public finances and the peasants' mentality. By means of a qualitative study conducted between March and October 2011, the present work strives to contribute to the analysis of irrigated agriculture systems in the southwest of Niger. The research focused on the traditional rice cultivation, vegetable gardens and the irrigation facilities. The study examined in detail the existing irrigation practices, the profits made and the difficulties the peasants faced. Finally, the problem-solving approaches chosen by the public authorities are discussed.

Keywords: Irrigated agriculture, foods crisis, Sahel, Niger