

CLIMATE CHANGE AND DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES IN SENEGAL

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My 2014-15 project, titled “Development and Climate Change in the African Sahel,” has been an exciting and novel opportunity that allowed me to both venture into a new area of research and forge new institutional collaborations overseas. Furthermore, I had the pleasure to work with a great group of resourceful and energetic graduate students.

The project is first and foremost an exchange program between three Master in Development Practice programs – based at UF, Sciences Po in Paris and the Université Cheikh Anta Diop in Dakar – which I initiated to encourage wider cooperation between students and faculty working on similar development-related themes across three continents. In particular, my objective was to focus participants’ attention to the multiple and cross-cutting environmental, demographic and development challenges playing out in one of the most vulnerable areas of the world. Although the African Sahel has come to the world’s attention through the media coverage of recent security and political crises, including the coups d’états in Mali (2012) and in Burkina Faso (2015) and a series of bloody terroristic attacks, this region does not usually represent a priority area for development programs and actors. If anything, the recent crises have discouraged development actors and limited the effectiveness and coverage of existing interventions. What is missing is a comprehensive and compelling understanding of the deep inter-connections between the multiple social, economic, environmental, demographic and political dimensions underlying the crises, across different domains and spaces.

The exchange program saw the participation of 2-3 students from each university, who then worked during the academic year in small groups on one particular theme, giving presentations at our workshops and external conferences. Collaboration across institutions and

continents was facilitated by three team meetings: at UF in September 2014, at Sciences Po during UF Spring break in 2015 and at UCAD in May 2015. The participation of other colleagues at each of these institutions was central for making these encounters valuable and enriching student experiences through lectures, seminars and field visits. In particular, I would like to mention Sarah McKune and Leo Villalón at UF, Aly Mbaye and Ibrahima Barry at UCAD, and Kate Vivian at Sciences Po.

The trip to Senegal was particularly meaningful. There, we exchanged with other students and faculty at UCAD, and met with several development consultants and organizations. We also visited two rural development projects near the town of Thiès, which represent innovative solutions by local rural population to adapt to the increasing negative effects of climate change. One project leverages wind energy to action pumps for field irrigation and enhance farmers’ yields; while the other has involved the excavation of large reservoirs in the fields for collecting run-off water during the rainy season, thus obviating to the problems of soil erosion.

The yearlong series of encounters and reflections sparked also the idea for a collaborative paper between myself and Sarah McKune (Public Health, UF). The paper titled “Innovative approaches to climate change: Climate information services in Senegal” aims to apply insights from recent empirical economics studies on cognitive processes and behavior under

uncertainty to explain why climate information services may not have led to the expected uptake of climate smart practices in rural Kaffrine, Senegal, despite the innovative approaches adopted. I presented a preliminary version of the paper at the 3rd International Conference on Sustainable Development Practice at Columbia University in September 2015. We hope to secure funding for further fieldwork and data collection so to be able to better test our hypotheses and identify a solid basis for lasting and effective solutions on the ground.

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