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*Cotton sector reform in Mali: explaining the puzzles**

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a detailed analysis of the cotton sector reform process in Mali from 2000 to 2011, explaining reform delays and ambiguities in terms of the wider political and socio-economic context and aid relationships. Contrary to arguments pointing to lack of state commitment and ownership, domestic stakeholders increasingly worked towards finding an acceptable and consensual reform package. The process encountered quite serious obstacles, however, due to divergent actors' incentives, and the existence of opposing philosophies about what a restructured cotton sector should look like. As a consequence of donors' misjudgement of the political and social realities underlying the Malian cotton sector, dialogue among stakeholders was difficult and polarised, forcing the government to spend considerable time and resources to find a suitable compromise. This paper contributes to a better understanding of the merits and limits of pursuing consensual policy processes against the constraints posed by divergent donors' policy paradigms.

INTRODUCTION

Comparative analyses of reforms in African cotton sectors show Mali as a late and hesitant mover. The country has committed to privatise and liberalise the sector, but has repeatedly procrastinated implementation

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(Baffes 2009; Tschirley *et al.* 2009; Delpeuch & Leblois 2011). Even within West Africa, where cotton reforms have been introduced later than other regions, Mali lags behind other major producer countries, such as Benin, Burkina Faso and Côte d'Ivoire, which have partially privatised and liberalised their cotton sectors beginning in the 1990s. The perceived failure to reform the country's major agricultural export sector also contrasts with the relatively successful liberalisation of the cereal sectors during the 1980s (Staatz *et al.* 1989).

Explanations for this puzzling lag have included arguments pointing to the existence of strong interests against privatisation, a lack of government capacity (Baffes 2009), inadequacy of the reform package proposed by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) (Fok 1997), and the government's opportunism in its dealing with the IFIs (Bergamaschi 2011). While insightful, these explanations offer only part of the story.

Based on an in-depth analysis of the political and socio-cultural context of Malian reforms, I argue that cotton sector policy during the period 2000–2011 is best understood as a case of selective reform, rather than an example of failed reform. The contextual analysis also indicates domestic support for reform actually increased over time, but was directed at interventions whose timelines, modalities and features differed from IFIs recommendations. All of this is contrary to previous arguments pointing to lack of state commitment and ownership. A more complete explanation for delayed or failed implementation should thus look beyond the notion of state will and capacity, to delve into the problematic government–donor relationships and the murky negotiations among domestic stakeholders for reaching consensus over reform.

Two sets of interrelated causes can explain the tortuous reform process and the incoherent and incomplete path to implementation. First, the cotton system is not just a source of exports and economic rents to the elites, but also an engine for rural development and national pride. Given the distinctive political and socio-cultural realities of the Malian cotton sector, the ideological distance between the reforms proposed by the Washington Consensus and the dominant domestic idea about the cotton sector's destiny was particularly pronounced. The juxtaposition between these two distinct logics, with their contrasting policy implications, created the utmost misunderstanding and animosity between donors and Malian actors. This contributed to prolonging the debate, hardening actors' positions and delaying the onset of reform.

Second, the presence of differentiated and conflicting domestic interests in this key economic sector meant the government could not impose reform in a top-down fashion, as was the case in the 1980s.

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It could not underplay the weight of farmer organisations, which can mobilise cotton strikes and protests that can be damaging to state interests and costly to ignore. Therefore, the state was virtually obliged to search for some form of consensus on reform – a time-consuming process and an additional cause for the slow and uncertain reform path. Even if the government had been capable of being more forceful, as many reform proponents were hoping, the short-term benefits of swift policy implementation would have been offset by long-term costs – eroded state legitimacy, decreased ownership and a limited sustainability. Once the most controversial part of the reform (the privatisation of the cotton company) finally became more acceptable domestically, the external conditions became less favourable, thus postponing implementation.

This case study provides a perspective on the limits and possibilities of economic reform in weak democracies, which differs from the mainstream literature on good governance and policy reform (World Bank 1989; Kaufmann *et al.* 2000). Far too often the African state is defined by its lacks – of capacity, commitment and political will – and by its inability to attain some normatively defined standards inherited from Weberian traditions (Pritchett & de Weijer 2011). The Malian cotton reform is thus regarded as a failure, because it did not lead to privatization of the *Compagnie Malienne pour le Développement des Textiles* (CMDT). Yet, when looked at closely, significant though less perceptible changes did take place, which affected actors' attitudes and relationships, and potentially prepared the ground for more lasting institutional and policy changes to occur. The Malian state attempted to forge a new policy direction for the cotton sector, more independent from donors. This confirms the important role of strategies of hybridisation (Booth 2010) and localisation (Acharya 2004), whereby local actors seek ways to transform and mediate imported institutions and ideas with local ones.

Reform processes require careful policy negotiations based on a deep understanding and delicate handling of local political, economic and social conditions. Unfortunately, donor conditionalities and normative ideas about what a successful reform should look like may themselves delay reform adoption and implementation, because they push governments into difficult dilemmas and complicate stakeholders' dialogue.

This paper is based on fieldwork conducted by the author during four visits to Mali in the period 2008–2010, consisting of interviews with relevant representatives of the government, the cotton company, producer organisations, research institutes, NGOs and donors in Bamako. Focus group discussions and interviews with cotton farmers and

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extension workers in twelve villages across all main cotton regions contribute to the data.[1] While fieldwork in Bamako produced multi-level information on the key phases of the reform and the stakeholders' positions, the village-level research yielded invaluable evidence on farmers' own evaluations of their situation, their relationships with their union leaders and their perceptions of the reform process. Field research was complemented by the analysis of numerous policy documents and unpublished material from the government of Mali and other organisations, written press releases and other secondary data.

COTTON SECTOR REFORM IN MALI: A FAILED REFORM?

The organisational foundations of the Malian cotton system were laid towards the end of the colonial period. The French, after failed attempts to scale-up indigenous cotton production by means of violence and coercion (Roberts 1996), established a new system based on economic incentives for small-scale farmers and an integrated industry model. The French cotton state company, *Compagnie Française pour le développement des fibres textiles* (CFDT), bought seed cotton from hundreds of thousands of farmers, processed it into cotton lint and exported it to international markets. The ginning firm later provided farmers with inputs on credit, extension, transport and other services (Fok 1993). A few years after Malian independence, the State created a new parastatal to take over the monopoly/monopsony position in the cotton sector. This new company, the CMDT, became a joint venture between the Malian state (60%) and the CFDT itself (40%).

The CMDT played an indisputable role in the country's cotton success story (Tefft 2000). Cotton production expanded four-fold between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s, bringing along small-holder mechanisation, improvements in cereal production (grown in rotation with cotton) and food security, as well as development of rural roads, schools and health centres (OECD 2006). The sharp drop in international cotton prices during the agricultural year 1985–86 was the first major blow. The decision to increase farm-gate prices, despite unfavourable market conditions, amplified the financial losses for the CMDT and caused it to require state budget support. The 50% devaluation of the CFA Franc (or FCFA, Franc of French African Community) in 1994 provided a respite by increasing the local currency value of CMDT export revenues and boosting production. However, corruption and political diversion of funds increased after the 1991 democratic transition (Bergamaschi 2011). Poor management practices over the years

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coupled with a further decline in international cotton prices led to a deteriorating financial situation in the late 1990s. In 2000, the CMDT had a deficit of US$ 60 million (equivalent to 2% of Mali's GDP) and it owed its creditors US$ 15 million (OECD/AfDB, 2002).

Reluctant to see donors' aid being used to cover these losses, international financial institutions mounted pressure for reforms (Hartmann 1988). These reforms required aligning producer prices with international prices, reducing the degree of involvement of the CMDT in non-cotton function, opening competition to private operators, and privatising the CMDT. It was within this context of international pressure that the CMDT decided to lower, quite at the last moment, the producer price for the 1999–2000 agricultural season. Farmers responded by protesting en masse against CMDT corrupt management and calling for a national boycott of cotton production, which was quite successful, despite incomplete adhesion by peasant organisations (Roy 2010). That year, cotton production almost halved (from about 460,000 to 243,000 tonnes). The boycott marked a political victory for cotton growers, who demonstrated their strategic importance and ability to harm state interests.

Squeezed between the opposing pressures from discontented farmer movements and increasingly impatient IFIs, the government called for a reform process and established a task force to restructure the cotton sector (*Mission de Restructuration pour le Secteur Coton*, MRSC). The MRSC mission was to consult stakeholders, evaluate reform options and make recommendations to the prime minister (MSRC 2001). Following a forum of cotton stakeholders in April 2001 — at which farmers' unions expressed their opposition to plans for privatising the CMDT — the government laid out the Cotton Sector Development Policy Paper (*Lettre de Politique de Développement du Secteur Coton*, or LPDSC), which espoused a gradual approach to reform (République du Mali 2001). At the end of 2005, the government adopted a revised timeline (*Chronogramme Révisé du 28 decembre 2005*), which deferred privatisation until after the 2007 general elections, but contained a more detailed indication of its modalities. The CMDT would be split into four subsidiaries (*filiales*), each operating in an exclusive cotton zone (thus generating four cotton regions), initially controlled by a CMDT holding company. Subsequently, the 2006 privatisation plan (*Schéma Opérationnel de Privatisation*, SOP) specified how the shares of each of the four subsidiaries were to be assigned: 61% to a private operator, 20% to cotton producers, 2% to company employees and 17% remaining with the State. The government's creation of the four subsidiaries was supposed to occur early in

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2007 but it became effective only in December, since most of that year's work went into the elaboration of several studies commissioned by the MRSC to evaluate different aspects of the privatisation. The parliament eventually approved the draft bill for the privatisation plan in July 2008.

The year 2010 marked some progress, as a tender launched in February led to pre-offers from six companies (all international except one Malian group). The only offer deemed acceptable was by the Chinese company Yue Mei for the purchase of two subsidiaries (Sikasso-Bougouni and Kita). The lack of further suitable purchasing offers coupled with the unexpected 2011 spike in international cotton prices lessened the domestic stakeholders' sense of urgency for reform. The spike had restored the CMDT's financial viability. The political crisis in Mali following the March 2012 coup d'état led to further delays in implementing the CMDT privatisation plan.[2]

Despite its hesitancies regarding the CMDT privatisation, however, the government implemented other reforms previously agreed with donors, such as the downsizing of the CMDT extension personnel in 2003 and the privatisation of the oilseed crushing company HUICOMA, both of which encountered various problems and attracted critiques domestically (La Nouvelle République 2010). Even more controversially, in 2005 the government adopted a new price determination mechanism for three agricultural years, as a condition to receive a World Bank loan. In line with international experts' recommendations, the price mechanism linked producer remuneration to a share of the total profits accruing to the cotton value chain, using a formula based on expected international cotton prices (République du Mali 2005). The IFIs argument for price indexation was the need to increase producers' share of the international price (Badiane *et al.* 2002). However, Mali's price mechanism caused an abrupt decrease in producer prices due to a combination of low international cotton prices and the government's previous policy of subsidising, rather than taxing, farmers (Serra 2012). This mechanism was thus strongly criticised by domestic experts and civil society for unduly penalising poor farmers, and, through evident disincentives to production, for jeopardising the very goal of economic growth that reform proponents vouched to pursue (Nubukpo & Keïta 2005; Oxfam, 2007).

Moreover, the government implemented institutional reforms that converted 7,177 village associations into fully fledged cotton producer cooperatives (*Societés coopératives des Producteurs du Coton*, SCPCs), and in 2007 established the National Alliance of Cotton Cooperatives (*Union National des Societés Coopératives des Producteurs du Coton*, UN-SCPCs),

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charged with the important task of representing cotton farmer interests during negotiations with the government, the CMDT and donors. However, the speed with which these cooperatives were created cast serious doubt on their institutional capacities. Also, traditional farmer unions resented these reforms, as the government used them as an opportunity to politically marginalise their more radical elements (Roy 2010).

Donors and international experts have expressed disappointment about Mali's reform record, emphasising the lack of progress, mainly because of the frustrating delays in the privatisation process.[3] This paper argues that the reform progress was not as dismal as it is often portrayed, when less perceptible but relevant changes are taken into account; and that the ambiguous and difficult pace was due not just to lack of political will but also to fundamentally contrasting policy paradigms, which hindered dialogue between stakeholders.

EXPLAINING REFORM DELAYS

Several factors have been advanced in the literature to explain delays to economic reform in African contexts. The most widely cited explanation is elites' vested interests (Bates 1987; Tangri 1999). State companies provide rents to elites, revenues to fund state programmes and sources for sustaining patronage relationships. Therefore, politicians and company bureaucrats adopt all sorts of resistance to fight privatisation and liberalisation. In the case of the copper state company in Zambia, for instance, delaying tactics served particular interests in the government, besides securing protracted high salaries for the officials involved in the reform process (Rakner *et al.* 2001).

Another explanation for reform hold-ups in African contexts is limited policy ownership, resulting from an insidious cycle of high aid-dependence, weak state capacity and donors' heavy use of conditionalities (for Mali, see Bergamaschi 2008). In Uganda, an important reform of the agricultural extension system that had gained wide donor and farmers' approval subsequently unravelled, since ownership within the government was in reality much more limited than anticipated (Kjaer & Joughin 2011).

Studies emphasising the challenges intervening during the policy implementation phase provide a further key for understanding policy delays and reversal. Even if the president and the political elites adopt and endorse a particular intervention, it can get stalled at a later phase because the bureaucrats and civil servants in the state administration

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may be against it and may find it more advantageous to boycott it or try to modify it along the way (Thomas & Grindle 1990). In West African contexts, where state bureaucrats carry out their tasks in a kind of impenetrable bubble, often operate through informal channels and are rarely sanctioned for misconduct (Olivier de Sardan 2008), the challenges of implementation are quite distinct from those of policy adoption. During implementation, state bureaucracies can thus thwart policy decisions previously undertaken by the government.

The new political economy literature has emphasised the role of underlying political and economic factors. Formal models of interaction among self-interested political actors explain opposition to economic reforms in terms of the type of government, the quality of political institutions, the size and power of opposition groups, and the degree of uncertainty on future economic gains and their distribution (Swinnen 2010).

When examining the challenges specific to policy environments in Francophone West Africa, a weak political-party system emerges as a distinctive feature (Bleck & van de Walle 2011). The absence of programmatic differences between political parties and the unwillingness of opposition parties to challenge the government on substantive issues, such as economic reforms, have implied weak parliaments, and limited real debates in the formal institutional arena. Furthermore, the predominant elitist nature of the governing class, composed of highly educated and urban elements espousing westernised and secular values, leads to policies that are more aligned with donors and external partners than with the values and priorities of the wider population.

All the factors just mentioned are applicable to the Malian case. There is no doubt that the prospect of losing private rents induced CMDT bureaucrats to block the privatisation process; while opposition from powerful domestic groups and highly uncertain benefits explain the government's initial resistance. Adhesion to reform was thus at first mainly opportunistic (or imposed, according to one's preferred interpretation), as the country badly needed to resume negotiations for new IFI loans. The political party system was also very weak under the two terms of Amadou Toumani Touré (2002–2012). His 'politics of consensus' demanded unanimity at the expense of political debate and of healthy confrontation in the formal institutional sphere (Bergamaschi 2011).[4] The disconnect between government and civil society is evident in the fierce attacks on the government (and on the IFIs) from the press, farmer organisations and prominent social activists. Much of the initial reform debate was actually not between domestic actors, but between

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the World Bank and the French development agency (AFD), with the latter disagreeing on the advantages of liberalising and breaking up the monopoly system.

Nonetheless, these traditional political economy explanations are better at explaining opposition to reform, but do less well in accounting for more nuanced situations (Birner & Resnick, 2010). Some literature simplistically assumes that reform is either accepted or rejected; and that political actors are self-interested and have defined goals (Grindle 1991). In reality, however, governments and other domestic actors may have mixed, and conflicting, objectives; national policy processes are murky and complex, and new preferences emerge that shift actors' choices and affect political dynamics.

I argue that the Mali cotton sector reform does not really resemble a pure case of failed or delayed reform. Not only did the government implement a number of reforms, facing at times significant domestic opposition, it also spent considerable time and resources in seeking ways in which privatisation reform could become acceptable within Mali – and genuinely supported it for a given period.

For a deeper understanding of the complex political and social factors underlying the cotton sector reform process in Mali, we need to recognise the role of ideas and cognitive frameworks (Birner & Resnick 2010), and in this instance, the co-existence of markedly differing views about how the cotton sector should be run. That external donor influences and a different framing of the issues can hinder policy implementation was a point already demonstrated in the case of a soil fertility initiative in Mali by Keeley & Scoones (2003). Though the reality is more complex, it is useful from an analytical standpoint to discuss two main paradigms. According to the first, the Malian cotton industry should be turned into a financially viable economic sector that does not rely on the state budget. Reforms within this 'sector approach' aim to maximise cotton profitability by reducing market distortions and promoting efficient farmers, all while encouraging marginal, unprofitable farmers away from cotton. According to the other paradigm, that I call the 'holistic' approach, the cotton sector represents one fundamental component of the wider rural economy, generating enhanced food security, poverty reduction and infrastructure. The main goal of reforms should be to ensure the development, stability and cohesion of this wider economic system, inclusive of marginal farmers, rather than just the profitability of the cotton sub-system.

Major donors and international consultants supported the first logic, while the CMDT, the government, producers and other civil society

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organisations shared the second paradigm. The divide was not just between foreign and domestic actors. Within the government, officials from the Ministry of Economics and Finance were sympathetic to the first approach, while the Ministry of Agriculture supported the other. Among donors, international NGOs such as Oxfam identified with the second paradigm, in contrast to the World Bank and the IMF. The French moved in between, initially defending the benefits of sector integration, but subsequently supporting the case for enhancing competitiveness and sector efficiency. Finally, Malian farmers' interests and perspectives also differ, with only the few large-scale farmers possibly supporting a more competitive system, while small-scale farmers (by far the majority) have traditionally welcomed agricultural parastatals (Moseley 2008).

While this type of ideological division applies to many other sectors and countries across the continent, I would argue that it is particularly distinctive of the Malian cotton sector. Cotton is a *strategic* productive sector in Mali, not just as a coveted source of rents to elites (politicians and bureaucrats), but also as a resource for development and poverty reduction (CMDT 2009). What distinguishes cotton from other rent-producing economic sectors, such as gold (which recently became the country's primary export), are its diffuse benefits. Cotton is the main source of livelihood for a quarter of the Malian population. Cotton production has funded infrastructural development and interventions in the populous southern regions, including road maintenance, schools, health centres, wells and literacy classes. Over time, cotton has become much more than an economic sector (Koenig 2008), and is instead elevated to an object of national pride and a basis for village social organisation, as well as a source of symbolic and cultural capital in southern Mali. The unique position of cotton in the Malian context has led to the emergence of an important constituency sensitive to the developmental impact of the cotton sector, one that cuts across various sectors of society including elements of the government and the political elite.

By embracing a narrow view of reform objectives, based on notions of economic efficiency and state budgetary balance requirements (IMF 2010), the donors and experts pushing for cotton sector liberalisation and privatisation showed their inability (or unwillingness) to take into account these broader social and cultural considerations. Malian actors' defence of the CMDT, with its vertically integrated cotton sector structure and its capillary presence in the rural social landscape, were dismissed as either the product of rent-seeking behaviour or unrealistic and out of touch with the exigencies of international markets. It was

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common in my interviews with donor representatives and international experts to hear suggestions that Malian stakeholders and farmers needed to change their minds and attitudes, and dismiss old practices and entrenched modalities of running the sector.

This gap in cultural understanding and political language among key stakeholders in the reform process provides us with an additional explanation for the reform delays. If the gulf between actors' positions was so large to start with, and the government needed to obtain a minimum policy consensus before acting, then investing in lengthy policy consultations and negotiations may have made sense. Key actors within the government, the producer association and even the CMDT did revise their initial stance and truly endorsed the privatisation plan. In other words, the policy process had an impact on actors' assessment of the reform benefits, even if it did not result in the privatisation outcome (for reasons later explored).

The Mali case thus provides important insights into actual political dynamics and the limits and possibilities for policy change, while reminding us that policy changes may not occur in discreetly perceivable ways, but subtly and unpredictably (Center for the Future State 2010).

THE CMDT PRIVATISATION SAGA

This section advances the hypothesis, supporting it with carefully collected evidence from fieldwork observations, documents and interviews, that the lengthy debates about CMDT privatisation during 2006–2010 were not just the result of the government's delaying game with donors, but a strategy to deal with the multiple and opposite policy pressures, and to identify possible avenues for consensus. With CMDT's political influence looming large, the government initially possessed limited autonomy in the reform process. Over time, however, the slow process of stakeholders' negotiation paid off, by giving the government greater margins to strike a compromise on the CMDT privatisation plan, which was arguably achieved during the late 2000s. The consultation process was led by one small unit within the government, which had sufficient cultural and political capital to lay the basis for reforms that were more acceptable domestically than those originally proposed by the World Bank.

CMDT: the cotton queen

One distinctive feature of the Malian cotton sector has been the powerful and privileged position enjoyed by the CMDT, even when

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compared with other African cotton parastatals. The CMDT was not just holder of monopoly and monopsony rights in the cotton value chain, but has acted as the dominant development actor in the vast cotton areas of Mali, performing such diverse roles as rural road maintenance, natural resource management and the building of schools and health centres (Fok 1997). By carrying out programmes on behalf of the State and providing the government with important tax revenues, the CMDT became known as *l'état dans l'état* ('the state within the state'). CMDT officials forged close links with the ruling party, and received significantly higher wages and benefits than other state employees (Keeley & Scoones 2003). One problematic consequence of this success has been a traditionally weak Ministry of Agriculture, resentful of the CMDT stepping into its sphere of competence.

As it would be expected from any parastatal enjoying huge market power and rent control, the CMDT was opposed to the privatisation programme and did everything possible to resist it. After privatisation was first put on the government agenda in 2001, CMDT officials continued to voice their disagreement, refusing to cooperate.[5] Even one year after the privatisation policy had become law, top CMDT representatives were publicly criticising the government for subscribing to a reform process that was allegedly depriving the company of the essential resources to operate effectively, and leading the sector to imminent catastrophe.[6]

Other domestic actors, from the producer associations to the president and the prime minister, were also adamantly averse to privatisation. When donors repeatedly approached the subject in the late 1980s and then again throughout the 1990s, the government advanced contrarian arguments, asserting that it would be sufficient to reform the CMDT from within. The decision to commit to comprehensive cotton sector reforms in 2001 was mainly motivated by the Economy Ministry's dire need to unfreeze IFI loans, which were made conditional on such reform,[7] and to the government's embarrassment after the detrimental farmer cotton boycott.

In 2001, there is no doubt that government ownership of the reform was low. The Cotton sector development policy paper (*Lettre de Politique de Développement du Secteur Coton*, LPDSC) mentions the privatisation of the CMDT only once (République du Mali 2001). The appointment of Fagnanama Koné (a respected but ageing cotton sector veteran, first CEO of the CMDT back in the 1970s) as chairman of the newly constituted *Mission de Restructuration du Secteur Coton* (MRSC) seemed to

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signal that the government reform process would not be inimical to the interests of the CMDT.

Nonetheless, the position of government officials, of farmers and their representatives shifted over time as a result of the MRSC-initiated process of stakeholders' consultation.

The MRSC's role

The MRSC was formally tasked with the functions of consulting with stakeholders and giving advice to the prime minister. Small in size but cohesive in structure, its core was constituted by the president, an old-school veteran of the cotton sector, and two faithful associates, with North American PhDs and good international exposure.[8] The MRSC's challenges were numerous. Identified as the visible face of government cotton policies, it faced criticism from all constituencies opposed to the Washington consensus reforms. It also openly confronted donors (the World Bank representatives in particular) over the suitability and timing of recommended policies. The MRSC withstood these opposite pressures by promising domestic interlocutors that it was committed to preserving the distinctive features of the Malian cotton sector, while reassuring donors that it was serious about implementing reform. In the midst of high levels of dissent and uncertainty, it took upon itself the difficult task of seeking a compromise between donors' requests and locally perceived exigencies of the cotton sector. This trio worked in unison,[9] investing a considerable amount of resources and energies to foster dialogue and organise meetings among cotton stakeholders.

Their first main task was to consult with cotton producers. Historically, farmer organisations are very vocal in Mali, representing the most visible and organised stance against structural adjustments and the policies of the neo-Washington consensus (Bingen 1998).[10] Farmers have also represented a relevant political constituency in democratic Mali, and have held the power to challenge the state and its interests, as demonstrated with the protests during the 1991 democratic transition and the 2000 cotton boycott. However, producer organisations had become increasingly divided since 2000, with the emergence of new unions. Some had voiced profound dissatisfaction with the CMDT in the aftermath of the 2000 cotton boycott (Roy 2010). Unlike what has been generally assumed about farmer opposition to the CMDT privatisation (Le Républicain, 22.7.2008), our interviews with farmers suggested that the privatisation was no longer taboo. Disillusioned with the status quo, many farmers, especially in Fana, Bouguni and Sikasso cotton regions,

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stated they would not ideologically oppose interventions if they could improve their dire situation.

The MRSC took advantage of this discontent by luring more sympathetic farmer leaders into the UN-SCPC, explicitly created to be the farmer representative body in the reform process and replace the more politicised and internally fractured traditional unions. The MRSC argued that farmers' involvement in the reform process could reduce the rampant inefficiencies and corruption within the system, and give their associations the opportunity to take a more active role in the sector management. The MRSC strategy of rapprochement with the farmers succeeded in raising the profile of the new producer organisations as essential actors in cotton policy-making.[11]

The second challenge was to negotiate with donors a way to avert the risks of market liberalisation. The zoning scheme, adopted in 2006, split the CMDT into four zones and envisaged a distinct (private) firm operating in each zone as a local monopoly. Zoning was a compromise between the proponents of a sector approach, who advocated more efficient cotton management, and the defenders of a holistic approach, who wanted to preserve the vertically integrated system. Interviews with government and producer representatives make it apparent that the exclusive relationship between farmers and a cotton monopsony was more valuable to stakeholders than state ownership of the CMDT itself. The government feared that liberalisation along the value chain would lead not only to the collapse of the input distribution and credit system, as happened in Benin in the 1990s (Yerima & Affo 2010), but also would destroy the very essence of the Malian cotton system.

The MRSC's third challenge was to land a privatisation plan that was acceptable to the CMDT, and would not diminish the company's prestige. This was achieved in two steps. First, by showing other stakeholders including farmer organisations the advantages of privatisation, the MRSC reduced the margins for the CMDT to credibly support the status quo. Second, the MRSC dealt very carefully with the CMDT itself, taking time to negotiate and opting for measured language – for instance, using the term 'restructuring' in official documents rather than 'privatisation'.

After years of stalled half-agreements and intentions, the social plan for the CMDT was finally approved in January 2010. It contained a very generous package for the early voluntary retirement of 352 CMDT employees at a cost to the state of almost FCFA 9 billion (about US$ 18 million), and the commitment to retain most of the remaining employees in one of the four new companies. This deal, which received

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much press coverage, confirmed the extraordinary leverage enjoyed by the CMDT in the Malian political context, and the willingness of the then new CEO, Tiéna Coulibaly, not to hurt the powerful employees' union (L'Indépendant, 8.1.2010; Nouvel Horizon, 12.1.2010). Our interviews and reading of press articles pointed to a generally increased national acceptance of the CMDT privatisation, generally referred to as a 'hand-over of shares' (*cessation des actions*).

A plausible interpretation of the evidence is that the government accepted the notion of the CMDT privatisation as a counterpart for avoiding liberalisation – in the hope such reform would be less damaging to the existing cotton system. Under this thesis, Mali's support for the CMDT privatisation, at least during 2009–2011, was no longer an empty promise destined to remain unfulfilled, but rather a more genuine and meaningful commitment to a wider bargain over the political and economic future of the cotton system.

A NEW VISION AND BETTER-OWNED POLICIES?

In order to support the interpretation whereby the government accepted the CMDT privatisation intentionally, rather as an act of pure pretence, this section demonstrates that this was part of a broader and more ambitious attempt by the MRSC to re-orient cotton sector interventions. The window of opportunity opened up in January 2010 when the government and the CMDT reached a consensus about the company's privatisation. Another significant factor was the easing of tensions in the relationship with the key donors.

Whether due to frustration with the government's slow response or instead the sense that the government was moving in the right direction, or simply due to the global economic crisis, the IFIs softened their stance. The World Bank demonstrated a renewed willingness to back up the government's own reform efforts, by providing resources (about US$ 7·6 million) to pay arrears due by the CMDT to producers, and thus helped to re-launch cotton production (World Bank 2011). In 2009, it withdrew from direct cotton sector intervention, opting for a more general budget support. The IMF ceased to request the CMDT privatisation as aid conditionality (Les Afriques, 9.10.2010). The privatisation in 2009 of the former French state cotton company, now GEOCOTON, created the conditions for the French development agency, which had encountered moments of anxiety and frustration with the Malian government (as illustrated by Cavana 2008), to adopt a more hands-off approach.

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Taking advantage of these greater margins, in 2010 the government adopted two new documents: the national strategic framework for the development of the cotton sector for 2010–2015 (Cadre Stratégique National de Développement du Secteur Coton), approved in May, and the Policy Document for Supporting the Cotton Sector (Lettre de Politique de Soutien au Secteur Coton), approved in August (République du Mali 2010a, 2010b). A careful analysis of these documents reveals a significant change in language and tone with respect to the 2001 strategic document, the LPDSC. While the latter follows the narrow logic of cotton sector restructuring in line with donors' prevailing discourse, the strategic framework reclaims the need to approach reform 'within a holistic, global and inter-disciplinary approach' and 'to promote an agriculture, which is sustainable, diversified, modern and competitive . . . which can favour the emergence of a true centre of development in Southern Mali' (République du Mali 2010a: 8, 9; author's translation).

Although policy documents do not necessarily translate into actual policy, their analysis is nevertheless useful to detect actors' shifting motivations and new tendencies. It is impossible not to notice here a new recognition of the cotton sector's strategic role for the country's overall economic policy, as delineated in the 2007–2011 Strategic Framework for Growth and Poverty Reduction (Cadre Stratégique pour la Croissance et la Réduction de la Pauvreté). Consistent with the MRSC attempt to re-cast the role of the state, this new phase highlights the state guidance and coordination function, precisely at times when some cotton sector functions were devolved to other actors.[12]

The new policy course involved a renewed government interventionist stance during 2009–2012. This included a fertilizer subsidy programme for three consecutive cotton seasons, pro-active efforts to pay farmers on time and new hiring of extension agents. With donor support, the government also established a programme for condoning cooperatives' debt. Government and CMDT representatives intensified their visits to rural areas to persuade farmers to plant cotton. In February 2011, Mali adopted a law creating a Cotton Regulatory Authority. Production increased again, and the quality of services provided along the cotton value chain was generally considered much higher. Hopes of reviving the Malian cotton sector were high (maliweb.net 2011).

The relevant question is why the privatisation project stalled. Although it is legitimate to doubt the state's real commitment to its implementation (Traoré 2007), it is equally reasonable to argue that the

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emergence of new factors delayed privatisation. The sharp rise in international cotton prices during 2010–2012 (ICAC 2011) helped rebalance the CMDT's financial accounts, which not only reduced the pressure to privatise, but also increased the company's purchase value. As a consequence, the identification of adequate offers for the remaining two cotton zones became more difficult to come by. Then came the March 2012 coup d'état, which delayed any kind of structural policies. The democratic elections in July 2013 have opened a new phase of negotiations with donors. It remains to be seen whether the new government will continue the previously agreed upon reforms.

Overall, the evidence presented in this paper suggests that, through a long gestation process, Malian actors came to genuinely agree on a privatisation plan; and were on the path of turning a reform initially perceived as externally imposed into a more endogenous, albeit imperfect, process, striving to compromise between opposite policy pressures.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY: REFORM PROCESSES IN EMERGING DEMOCRACIES

Weak democracies such as Mali face challenges to their ability to devise and implement policies that improve economic development in a sustained way, due to the limited institutional capacity of democratic institutions, and high levels of aid dependence. We know the problem is neither the democratisation process, which per se is not inimical to economic reform (van de Walle 1999), nor the type of government (Kelsall & Booth 2010), nor even the precise content of policies (Rodrik 2007). What are then the lessons that can be drawn from the Malian cotton case, and what do they tell us about the limits and possibilities of economic reforms in emerging, but institutionally weak, African democracies?

Productive sectors that have a potential overlap of interests between politicians and wider sections of the rural population need to be tackled in a politically and culturally sensitive manner. Higher cotton volumes in Mali not only generate important economic rents for the government through export taxes,[13] but also typically reduce poverty (Oxfam, 2007; Delarue *et al.* 2009). The reforms initially proposed by donors, such as the 2003 cut to non-cotton extension and the 2005 price mechanism, tended toward downsizing the sector by encouraging inefficient and marginal farmers to abandon cotton (Nubukpo & Keïta 2005). The donors' insistence that the cotton sector become viable, by

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shedding its wider development functions, was controversial and divisive.

Instead, the nature of state and politics in Mali is one in which reaching a modicum of national policy consensus is required to obtain legitimacy. The institutional capacities of opposition parties and the parliament may be weak (Bleck & van de Walle 2011), yet the government is exposed to opposition from informal and spontaneous means of civil society mobilisation. Although rarely employed, these forms have proven to be damaging to state interests, and corrosive of its overall legitimacy.[14] Examples of these instances are the role of farmer organisations in the popular protests that toppled the one-party illiberal regime of Moussa Traoré in 1991, and the 2000 cotton boycott, which led to sizeable decreases in government tax revenues. To the extent that the government wants to minimise such threats, it cannot afford to implement policies without some form of support from below.[15] In order to avoid painful confrontations, which may decrease their legitimacy and electoral acceptability, such governments may need to undertake formal processes of reflection and consultation, however long, costly and uncertain the outcomes might be.[16]

In order to fruitfully engage with national policy processes, donors and external experts should go beyond their inherited policy paradigms, and instead let the local social, political and economic context inform their policy approach to countries' reform. Many influential policy documents[17] were mainly governed by the sector approach to cotton policy-making, which, despite its impeccable logical appeal, is not suited to the particular institutional and market features prevalent in Mali. The IFIs' adherence to this paradigm explains at least part of the Malian resistance to undertaking reform. Due to the difficulties of not only understanding, but also acting upon, the local institutional context,[18] donors and international experts failed to appreciate the extent of the challenges, and brushed aside intervening difficulties by generic reference to corruption and lack of political will. One should add that the imperative to identify reforms that are more respectful of national priorities should prevail even if the main obstacle to progress is simply a lack of state capacity. Precisely because balancing contradictory pressures from multiple angles is beyond the capacity of any single actor in Mali, donors should contribute to reducing, not enhancing, such demands. Supporters of reform should be humble, and realise that the best outcome of a reform process may be difficult to know in advance, especially when it comes to content. Given the unpredictable nature of policy processes, donors have a better chance to positively contribute to

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reform by supporting the learning process within existing institutions and processes, accepting the inevitability of trials and errors,[19] and being open-minded about possible outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS

The Malian cotton sector reform process officially started in 2001 with the establishment of the MRSC, in response to the farmers' cotton boycott of 2000 and to multiple donor pressures. Some crucial reforms are still incomplete, notably the privatisation of the state cotton company, which has been planned multiple times and repeatedly delayed. Although the ambiguous and uncertain reform in Mali may appear as a classic instance of failed reform, due to a lack of capacity, and to politicians' and bureaucrats' attempts to retain a coveted source of rents, this paper demonstrates that domestic stakeholders increasingly worked towards finding an acceptable and consensual reform package. The process encountered quite serious obstacles, however, due to divergent actors' incentives, and the existence of opposing philosophies about what a restructured cotton sector should look like.

Multilateral donors, in particular, adhered to a narrow sector approach, based on notions of economic efficiency and state budgetary balance requirements. This was contrasted by the more holistic perspective espoused by domestic actors, supportive of a capillary presence of the cotton company in the rural landscape. Mali's defence of the vertically integrated cotton sector was dismissed as either the product of rent-seeking behaviour or of unrealistic expectations, out of touch with international market requirements. As a consequence of donors' misjudgement of the political and social realities underlying the Malian cotton sector, dialogue among stakeholders was difficult and polarised, forcing the MRSC to spend considerable time and resources to find a suitable compromise. A close reading of the policy process and interviews with domestic actors suggest that support for the CMDT privatisation was genuine in the late 2000s; and that changes in external conditions (lack of reliable offers, international prices increases and the coup d'état) rather than sheer lack of commitment were responsible for lack of implementation. Commentators who make negative evaluations of Malian cotton sector reform fail to remark on important positive outcomes, which were attained thanks to substantial, yet unrecognised, domestic actors' efforts: greater consensus, a reform plan that followed modalities more adapted to local realities, and better cotton

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performance indicators since 2010 (and not just linked to international price increases).

Though it is hard to draw lessons from a reform process that is still unfinished, our analysis demonstrates that efforts to turn externally imposed reform into endogenous processes can occur in countries characterised by limited democratic legitimacy and insufficient political and administrative capacity. However, these efforts would have better chances of succeeding if development partners were willing to engage with a country's specific political, social and cultural local realities, and treat them as resources that need to be capitalised upon, rather than as constraints to be overcome. Ultimately, this paper argues, policy priorities in emerging democracies should shift from an all-encompassing ambition to increase state capacity in order to implement 'best practices', to a more fitting target of identifying solutions that are feasible and sustainable, because they are anchored in countries' own realities (Booth 2011).

NOTES

1. The author personally visited the following villages (cotton regions): Batimakana and Manako (Kita); Guana (Fana); Faragouaran (Bougouni); Soukoula and Kafara (zone OHVN), while the local research team on its own continued with individual interviews and focus group discussions in six other villages, including Sikasso and Koutiala cotton regions.

2. It is too soon at present to establish the extent to which the new President, Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, elected in July 2013, and his government are committed to the CMDT privatisation process.

3. Baffes (2009), for instance, has a sub-title 'Mali: not wanting to engage in reforms'.

4. Bergamaschi (2011) appropriately emphasises how the slogan for the 2007 presidential campaign 'a Mali which wins' (*un Mali qui gagne*) negates the possibility for 'a Mali which changes' (*un Mali qui change*).

5. Interviews with representatives of producer associations and the Ministry of Agriculture, May 2009.

6. These opinions were openly voiced during the cotton sector stakeholders meeting I organised in Bamako, Mali, in May 2009.

7. Conditionalities requiring cotton sector reforms were attached to the IMF Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility (IMF, 2002) and to two Structural Adjustment Credits by the World Bank, SAC III and SAC IV (World Bank, 2004, 2006).

8. Although in existence up to this date, I use the past tense to describe the MRSC during the period focus of the study.

9. A symptomatic aspect is that all my numerous meetings at the MRSC have always taken place with the three members together, regardless of whom I might have initially contacted to propose a meeting.

10. Farmer organisations are part of multiple platforms at national, regional and international levels. Malian peasant organisations have waged campaigns against land grabbing and the introduction of GM crops into the country, and are part of *La Via Campesina* and other prominent international farmer networks. Bamako has hosted many anti-liberalisation initiatives, including one of the three Polycentric World Social Forums in 2006.

11. Farmer organisations continue to face numerous challenges, due to lack of capacity to carry out new functions, and low leaders' accountability. During our interviews, most farmers criticised their leaders for betraying the collective cause and seeking only power and money for themselves.

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12. This observation echoes Hibou's (1998) argument that privatisation of African parastatals implies, rather than an abdication of state authority over economic rents, its redeployment around new modalities and compromises.

13. Moreover, even when the government subsidises the sector, export tax revenues remain a key source of economic rents for key sections of the government, with consequent strong pressures to incentivise production.

14. The uprising of middle-level army ranks, which brought down the ATT government on 20 March 2012, though quite different in nature from the farmer protests that are referred to here, stemmed from the same factors of low legitimacy of the institutions and weakness of the Malian democracy. Virtually any government in post-democratic Mali felt vulnerable to outside pressures.

15. The World Bank seems in the end to have reached a similar conclusion: 'Understanding the political economy of reforms is critical. Consensus is sought for major policy decisions in Mali. The process can be lengthy, delaying implementation of critical reforms … While this [the government's choice to conduct studies and stakeholder consultation] delayed the process, it could strengthen ownership of the mechanism and facilitate its implementation' (World Bank 2011: 21).

16. van de Walle (1995: 138–9) concludes that 'political elites must establish the mechanisms by which to generate consensus as a regular element of democratic governance'.

17. Badiane *et al.* (2002), Baffes (2007) and Baghdadli *et al.* (2007) among others.

18. In the case of the World Bank, the problem is also the predominance of the line from Washington rather than from national offices, where knowledge of the local context is certainly more developed.

19. Faust's (2010) insightful description of the iterative and experimental nature of policy processes in mature Western democracies provides a sobering example.

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