

Evaluer, influencer, gouverner: l'enjeu des chiffres dans les politiques de la lutte contre la pauvreté au Mali

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Résumé

Les indicateurs quantitatifs jouent un rôle central dans l'évaluation des politiques publiques et les négociations d'aide contemporaines, en particulier en Afrique sub-saharienne. Dans le même temps, les bailleurs de fonds internationaux ont fait de l'appropriation, la lutte contre la pauvreté et la réforme de l'Etat leurs objectifs principaux. A partir de l'expérience du Mali, cet article montre comment, en fétichisant ces indicateurs, la gestion axée sur les résultats s'apparente à une technologie de pouvoir qui permet aux agences internationales d'évaluer, d'influencer et de contrôler les décisions prises au sujet de la pauvreté et de son gouvernement. Dans la pratique, le cadre conjoint d'évaluation de la mise en œuvre du Cadre Stratégique de Lutte contre la pauvreté (CSLP) consiste en une agrégation imparfaite d'indicateurs arbitraires et de faible qualité. Une analyse approfondie de cette matrice révèle que les techniques de GAR ne remplissent pas le rôle qui leur est généralement attribué, mais que leur production et leur manipulation donnent du pouvoir à ceux qui les contrôlent.

Assess, Influence, Govern: Data and PRSP Politics in Mali

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Abstract

Quantitative indicators have come to play an increasingly central role in public policy assessment and contemporary aid relationships, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time, international donors have identified ownership, poverty reduction and state reform as their primary goals. Building on Mali's experience, this article argues that results based management (RBM), by fetishising these indicators, confers power over the policy making process to international aid agencies. RBM can therefore be conceived as a technology of power used by international donors to assess, influence and control poverty and its governance. In practice, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) matrix consists of highly imperfect, sometimes almost arbitrary numbers. An in-depth assessment of the country's PRSP implementation joint assessment matrix reveals that RBM techniques do not necessarily play the role attributed to them, yet the production and manipulation of these quantitative indicators still gives power to those that control them.

Introduction

Mali was one of the first francophone West African countries to experiment with the implementation of the post-Washington aid efficiency paradigm because it met a number of positive criteria that are important in the eyes of international donors: it has been a democracy since 1991; the government's commitment to economic and political reform is considered sufficient; the country enjoys relative political and social stability in a much-troubled region; and its governance ratings are deemed satisfactory. What is more, Mali is a highly aid-dependent country. Between 1996 and 2005, aid flows from about forty bilateral and multilateral donors represented, on average, three quarters of the country's Special Investment Budget, and 27.6 per cent of the state's general budget. Hence, Mali had a strong

interest in collaborating with the international donor community in its attempt to introduce new protocols and management techniques.

The three main aspects of recent aid reform efforts in Mali include: changes in the aid management system; the elaboration of two Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers, in 2002 and 2006; and the introduction of new aid modalities, including general budget support, which currently accounts for about 10 per cent of total aid disbursement but is expected to increase in coming years. This shift in aid modalities has altered donor interventions, government practices and donor-recipient relationships. It has led, among other things, to a strong emphasis on results-based management (RBM) in the assessment of public policies, requiring strategic planning, more effective reporting and monitoring of annual performance, and consequently the generation of a wide variety of quantified indicators. RBM, which was introduced in Mali, against considerable opposition under the influence of the European Commission and the French embassy, eventually led to the creation of the PRSP implementation joint-assessment matrix (hereafter called the matrix), in order to provide a solid empirical basis for assessing PRSP implementation, nurturing donor-government policy dialogue, and informing donor decisions concerning general budget support disbursements.

This article explores the modalities, functions, uses and effects of the recent proliferation of international aid data in Mali. It argues that when this is associated with a shift to results-based management, this constitutes a technology of power that can be used by international donors to assess, influence and control the way poverty – and policy – are dealt with. However, an in-depth examination of the country's Matrix shows that, in practice, RBM techniques do not play the role attributed to them. The use of the matrix within the RBM framework does not lead to more precise, or objective, decisions, as its advocates argue, but rather serves to obscure issues and to confer power to those responsible for the creation and manipulation of highly imperfect, and often inscrutable, indicators.

Theoretically, the article builds on development anthropology and a Foucauldian analysis of power to discuss the impact of these new aid modalities on domestic politics and the way in which states are being reconstituted (see also Gould,

2005). Despite its acknowledged limitations,² I apply the governmentality approach to my analysis of current aid relationships in order to show how altered aid relations provide a context for disciplinary practices. In fact, PRSPs and their by-products, including RBM, will be shown to be self-disciplining tools embedded within “a depoliticized mode of technocratic governance” (Gould and Ojanen, 2003: 7, see also Ruckert in this volume). I build on the premise that the development partnerships currently being offered to African governments are best regarded as “a form of advanced liberal rule that increasingly governs through the explicit commitment to the self-government and agency of recipient states”, whose power “does not lie primarily in relations of domination, but in techniques of cooperation and inclusion” (Abrahamsen, 2004: 1453-54).

The following section deals with the reasons for, and significance of, the aid community’s increasingly heavy reliance on quantitative indicators in the context of the Post-Washington Consensus. The next section discusses the poor quality of the data contained in the Matrix, and notes that it is judged to be highly unsatisfactory by many experts. The article then shows how the resulting confusion and ambiguity leaves ample room for all contending actors to promote their own goals and interests. The article finally underlines the significance of these political economic developments on governmentality, and paves the way for a broader historical evaluation of the role of data as tools for mediation and extraversion in post-colonial Mali.

The Multiple Goals of Data in the Post-Washington Consensus: Influence and Govern

Inspired by New Public Management theories, RBM first came to prominence in the United States, the United Kingdom and Canada at the end of the 1980s as part of a push to intensify the monitoring and assessment of public policy in an effort to reduce the size of the state. Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello have shown that the proliferation of short-term objectives is a key component of “the new spirit of capitalism”, and one meant to enhance people’s commitment to the neoliberal project (2005). Used on a daily basis in firms, RBM represents a less rigid form of management than traditional planning. In contemporary project-led societies ruled by micromanagement and promoted in a vast management literature, an apparent autonomy is given to

employees as monitored self-control and self-censorship replace hierarchy and external constraint as management techniques (Boltanski and Chiapello, 2005: 125).

The introduction of similar governance techniques in developing countries is largely the result of international donor influence and has sharply increased the role played by quantitative data in the policy process, especially because the new focus on 'poverty reduction' emphasizes the need to target the 'poorest of the poor', so that quantification becomes a constitutive constraint for aid practitioners. This stems from the belief that measuring poverty is a pre-requisite for combating it, and will produce strong incentives for recipient governments to do so. The Millennium Development Goals, with their precise quantified objectives and timeframe, are symptomatic of a trend that has led to a proliferation of data and statistics on poverty in developing countries as states in the developing world are 'put in the driver's seat' (as the aid jargon puts it) and are evaluated based on their ability to reduce 'measured poverty'. Public policy follow-up is instrumental in the creation of such states, to the extent that data has become a major tool in the global governance project (Williams, 2003) and the West's 'will to govern' the 'borderlands' (Duffield, 2001). In the new aid model that emerged out of the criticisms of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), donors are attempting to (re-)build states committed to poverty reduction in developing countries. Interestingly, these joint efforts are considered, in the medium term, to help with the emergence of government leadership and ownership of development policies, understood as the national commitment to adjustment measures and reforms (see Johnson and Wasty, 1993; Khan and Sharma, 2003; Johnson, 2005). As core policy recommendations formulated by international financial institutions (IFIs) have not changed significantly in response to observed failures and critics, the focus on ownership and poverty reduction should be understood as a way to embed the old adjustment reforms more deeply in Southern states and societies (Fine et al., 2001).

The Legitimacy Fix: Data as a Response to 'Aid Fatigue'

The global proliferation of poverty data occurred at a time when aid policies and agencies were going through a deep crisis of legitimacy, and it is being used by donors to restore their

contested relationships with recipient governments on what appears to be a more objective basis. By the end of the 1980s, aid flows to Africa were threatened both by the divergence of aid funds to countries of the former Communist bloc, and by the growing legitimacy crisis that was engulfing aid in general, and the IFIs in particular, because of the widely held view that aid was not only failing to reach the poor, but was all too often nurturing the rich elites at the heart of the problem (Woods, 2006: 141-178). In particular, the role of IFIs as ‘trendsetters’ was challenged by an increasingly crowded development community (Eagleton-Pierce, 2008: 14). After repeated calls for ‘adjustment with a human face’ (e.g. UNICEF, 1987), a number of different responses, conceived as ownership, participation, and poverty reduction, emerged out of this crisis to enhance IFI political legitimacy and promote expertise.

Theodore Porter’s work on the history of science can help to explain the diffusion of RBM throughout the international aid system. Porter explains that “numbers, graphs and formulas [are] ... strategies of communication” that can serve as “a response to conditions of distrust attending the absence of a secure and autonomous community” (1995: viii-ix). And so, in a moment of crisis, donors have sought to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness by means of scientific proofs and more objective results. Seen as vectors of rigor and universality, numbers are especially convenient for aid professionals since they can be easily transported across continents and oceans.

Assess, Control, Hold a Dialogue

For donors, the introduction of RBM was meant to give the Malian government clear and monitorable incentives to implement PRSPs while providing donors with a relatively objective basis on which to base annual disbursements of general budget support (GBS). These disbursements have been made conditional upon the implementation of the PRSP, the cornerstone of the new aid paradigm. And although the matrix is only one basis for GBS disbursement, it is a central one. As the Government of Mali acknowledges: “[d]onor support will depend on PRSP implementation, hence the importance of the yearly assessment” (République du Mali, 2007: 6).

Within the context of this new approach, donors are particularly reluctant to speak about conflict and coercion, as

opposed to dialogue, partnership and consensus. Alastair Fraser has suggested that “new aid partnerships can perhaps then best be understood as *therapeutic interventions* or *confidence building measures*” (Fraser, 2006: 45-6, emphasis added). In this process, data are seen by donors as a balm that can, at least in principle, overcome emotional conflicts rooted in power imbalances and inevitably subjective assessments, by appealing to seemingly independent, scientific and objective knowledge. In Bamako, the strong desire of certain donor agencies to develop and use the Matrix despite its many acknowledged weaknesses, was based on the perceived need to begin discussions based on something substantive.³

Interrogating Mali’s PRSP Matrix

In July 2004, donors expressed interest in developing ‘a consensual list of indicators’ for assessing PRSP implementation and poverty reduction results⁴ and, to this end, a taskforce was set up, including the Malian Budget Division, a donor thematic group (led by the Netherlands), the PRSP technical unit,⁵ *l’Observatoire de la Pauvreté et du Développement Humain Durable*, the Development Planning Division, and the Civil Society National Council. The first version of this consensual list of indicators was submitted along with the Malian Budget in 2007, consisting of 51 actions or activities in 16 priority sectors. Each action is associated with an indicator, and the government’s overall grade will consist of the unweighted mean average of these indicators.

The Matrix

The content of the matrix has been the subject of intense debate between the government of Mali and its donors, since huge financial flows and aid predictability depend on the results that it generates. Inevitably, designing the matrix was a lengthy and difficult process as those in charge assembled a controversial set of indicators in a pragmatic, iterative process. In fact, many practitioners and experts have serious reservations about the resulting matrix. One symptomatically declared it to be “an unlikely patchwork of stupid indicators”.⁶ And it is indeed true that the indicators that were selected and aggregated in the matrix have many weaknesses. First, the quality and relevance of the matrix and its indicators will be discussed. The mere act of categorizing public policies and their complex realities into

quantitative indicators is questioned by some. For example, decentralization, which should be a transversal objective applied in all sectors (water, health, education), is compressed into one indicator. The insistence on annual assessments is also contested in that it imposes a short-term perspective on development and on public policy. In addition, many indicators refer to policy outcomes over which the government of Mali has very little control. Because the Malian economy is mostly based on agriculture, the number of poor people and the economic growth rate are strongly dependent on such factors as rainfall, international cotton prices and the euro/dollar exchange rate, and it would evidently be unfair and probably counter-productive to suspend GBS disbursements if changes in these parameters led to bad performance scores.

At the sectoral level, some indicators do not correspond to any change in policy, or any reality on the ground, and have no links to economic and social development. Concerning rural development, one indicator measures the rise in cotton production without taking into account the price at which it is sold. But as these prices are determined on international markets, Mali is vulnerable to external shocks, and measuring the volume of cotton production does not account for the real wealth it generates for cotton workers. In the same vein, the indicator, percentage of the national budget transferred to local communities, adopts a purely financial, budgetary approach to the political process of decentralization and thus does not tell much about the real delegations of power at play, and hence represents a rather superficial indicator. Moreover, some indicators are highly controversial, such as the indicator on corruption produced by Transparency International, based on the *perceptions* of firms and other stakeholders present in developing countries, which “can be very misleading” (Amsden, 2007: 132). On the other hand, the matrix results from the arbitrary aggregation of heterogeneous indicators. Some of the indicators generated by international organizations, for example the World Bank’s *Doing Business* report, rate Mali in comparison with other low-income countries so that the country’s performance depends on changes recorded in other countries. Furthermore, the different indicators cannot be effectively compared or reasonably considered to be of equal importance since some indicators are very broad in scope (growth rate, inflation rate, fiscal pressure rate), while others are fairly

narrow (the number of pre-birth medical consultations, the number of reports produced by national NGOs or the reduction in water pollution caused by proliferating plants). The sources of data provision are many (the World Health Organization, the World Bank, the National Statistical Division, ministries, NGOs, etc.) and the quality, scope and methodologies used by these institutions are very diverse. Some indicators included in the matrix measure numbers and quantities, others measure rates and ratios, while some are expressed in vague terms, such as the number of roads that are taken care of, or populations with access to better water. Some indicators can be collected every year while others cannot, and some of the variations measured cannot be compared over time.

International Requirements vs Local Realities: the Illusion of Quantification

There is also a very important gap between RBM and Malian administrative culture. Indeed, here it is useful to recall that RBM first emerged in the US, the UK and Canada, and was largely alien to the French administration system and the culture on which Malian administration is based. In the words of the French Ambassador to Mali:

The Paris agenda is *a challenge for French agencies* because it is based on an Anglo-American management culture. Result-based management is a very useful instrument, I think, but *it is alien to the French administrative culture*. During the OECD/DAC negotiations over the Paris declaration, in which I participated, the Americans, the Brits and the Canadians knew exactly what was meant by that. In France, we had hardly started introducing it with the LOLF [*Loi Organique relative aux Lois de Finances*, 2001].⁷

Yearly performance assessments seem alien to the Malian administration which suffers from most of the weaknesses shared by African administrations such as strong politicization, insufficient capacity and institutionalization and low accountability towards users. The inherent weaknesses of RBM's inordinate focus on complex indicators like the matrix are further heightened in the Malian context by the very weak domestic capacities in the field of statistics. Developing a strong statistical

apparatus has not been a top priority for recent governments in Mali. While many qualified experts work in the sub-region, few well-trained statisticians work for their country's underfunded, badly equipped, almost moribund national statistics divisions. It is also widely believed that structural adjustment programs have seriously undermined national capacities in development planning and national statistics. As a former director at the Ministry of Planning recalls, “[i]nstead of being extended to all ministries, the Planning and Statistics departments (*Directions de la Planification et de la Statistique*) that used to exist in all key ministries such as agriculture, health and education, were completely dismantled in 1989.”⁸ By focusing their policy dialogue on the Ministries of Economy and Finance, donors played a significant role in marginalizing planning and statistics capacities elsewhere in the government. Thus, in the aftermath of structural adjustment programmes, the country was left with little capacity to design and implement development policies, at the same time as donors created projects and databases that bypassed and further marginalized these national structures. The resulting pervasive lack of viable statistics has led to a situation where people talk a lot about poverty, but in fact know very little about its origins and permutations, with the result that the foundations for the current policy dialogue are fragile and in part subjective: “The current situations of the statistical system does not allow for...the production of available, coherent and reliable data. Paradoxically, the Malian civil service does produce a great amount of data, but *the sources are numerous and fragmented*, which means that the information provided is *not always coherent and harmonized*” (République du Mali, 2007a: 3, emphasis added).

A couple of foreign experts in public finance and expenses involved in the introduction of result-based management in Mali doubt that it is relevant to assess the government's policy by relying too much on the results of policies, while the most basic standards in public finances and expense are not met. Since most international aid still bypasses the national budget (because it is channeled through aid projects), the matrix cannot assess the efficiency of the government's use of aid. For one expert in public finance management, the introduction of RBM into Mali was too ambitious, in part because the expectations of what could be achieved by such systematic

monitoring of public policy were higher than those that apply in developed countries: “In France..., we established a list of indicators which measure a *marginal improvement* in public policy efficiency. In Mali, we established a list of *impact indicators*, which is very different because we set *outcome targets*”.⁹ Since many of the experts working in Mali are dissatisfied with the matrix and believe that simpler methods could be used to greater advantage, how can we account for the significance that continues to be attached to the matrix as it stands? And what role does it play in policy dialogue?

Accounting for the Weaknesses of the Matrix: Genesis of the Document

Telling the story of the matrix’s genesis can help one to understand its current weaknesses. The Matrix first came into existence because the PRSP annexes (which include details on its implementation) could not be used as a solid base for a joint assessment framework as the PRSP lacks prioritization and precision concerning operational implementation, financing, budgeting and follow-up. As a consequence, the people put in charge of drafting an assessment framework had to be very pragmatic: “we started with what we had”, said a participant.¹⁰ And beyond that, there was a great deal of improvisation. Because priorities were weak and the actors involved had vested interests, the temptation to aggregate different indicators was high. Many indicators were taken from other existing frameworks, whose quality inevitably varies greatly. And because the exercise was new and open ended, the number of indicators included in the matrix fluctuated widely, ranging from 30 to 140 at different points in time. For officials in the Malian government, the entire exercise initially looked like just another set of conditionalities, though they soon grew aware of its importance when they realized that bad performance indicators could jeopardize large amounts of the aid, money on which the country had become so dependent. As one foreign expert working in the Malian administration recalls: “At the very beginning, [they] had not understood this thing about indicators and were not interested in them. They only got it, and got into it, when they realized (in 2006, I think) that *there was a shortfall for them* concerning the EU variable tranches”.¹¹

The way the joint assessment framework was introduced

is important for understanding why, and how, Malian civil servants and ministries participated in drafting the document and how Malian civil servants conceive of, and use, the matrix in practice. During meetings, Malian civil servants did not always have a clear understanding of what a ‘good’ indicator ought to be. For line ministries, planting their own indicators was considered as a means to gain visibility and guarantee future external aid flows, which partly accounts for the proliferation of indicators. For donors too, getting their indicator into the matrix was both a way to be visible and to meet the ubiquitous demands from their headquarters for accountability, results and clear guidelines to justify the disbursement (or non-disbursement) of GBS funding. It should also be mentioned that apart from the World Bank and the IMF, many donor representatives did not have the technical expertise and experience to participate in budget follow-up discussions and to elaborate relevant indicators. The participants’ lack of time and interest in endless meetings concerning performance indicators added to that.

The Matrix in Practice: Unveiling its Functions and Creative Uses

The fact that the matrix has turned out to be so problematic – a weak aggregation of not so relevant indicators – has not, ironically, destroyed its usefulness, or even its desirability. On the contrary, the matrix, as it stands, has a function for the actors involved in the policy dialogue. In fact, it is precisely because so many of its indicators are irrelevant, difficult to quantify or achievable without any real policy change, that it can allow the space, and provide a framework, within which real differences can be negotiated; because most indicators are irrelevant, the confusion contained in the Matrix will necessarily require further assessments and arrangements. This, it is argued here, leaves great room to manoeuvre each set of actors. The following discussion will focus on how this occurs in practice.

The Matrix as an Arena for Negotiating Power and Sovereignty

As Alastair Fraser has argued, the ability of aid-recipients to escape, or to manage, donor conditionality and control have varied with the recipient government’s bargaining power, which is generally determined by the country’s economic, political,

ideological and strategic position and resources. Also, the resources used and strategies deployed by aid-recipient governments in order to bypass donor preferences adapt to aid fads, fashions and practices over time (Fraser, 2008: 45-74). In the current period characterized by partnership, avoiding, controlling or even obstructing dialogue seems crucial for the Malian government, as there are important breaches in the donor-government apparent consensus. The government's preferences typically include the protection of interests and rents (*per diem* perceived by Bamako-based agents of the Ministry of Health, for example), as well as development priorities that are not shared by donors. For instance, while donors wish to promote basic education, the government would prefer to focus on higher education; and while the government would like to develop infrastructure (roads, in particular), donors are reluctant to finance such projects for fear of being burdened with 'white elephants'. Finally, the government has some clearly political objectives that hardly fit in the poverty reduction framework, such as the president's re-election in 2007 or security in the northern regions and peace with the Tuaregs.¹² Donors fear that aid funds may be used (directly or indirectly) by the authorities to finance police and military expenses. Therefore, although donors are now formally involved in the budget process and in virtually all decision-making processes and sectors, keeping control over the decision-making process is important and it seems that the Malian government is very careful to protect the minimal degree of autonomy necessary to pursue its preferences and deal with policy constraints. The PRSP's poor quality, the complexity of government decision-making processes, and the confusion and fragmentation in aid management could be understood as tools used by the government.

In this context, the confusion and ambiguity associated with the matrix are of great significance in shaping the policy dialogue between the government and its donors. This ambiguity provides the government with a degree of autonomy over policy-making since, in so far as the indicators in the matrix are weak or ambiguous, this leaves room for outcomes – and therefore the government's performance – to be discussed and negotiated. In other words, the fact that the performance indicators are not set in stone allows Malian politicians and policy makers to feel that they do not have their hands tied once and for all, and that the

possibility of donor sanction (a pause or a cut in disbursement) is not systematic.

What is more, aid officials' lack of competence on budget issues can be considered as a major benefit for Malian public actors. The fact that some bilateral donors (the Netherlands and Canada, for example) have only a limited understanding of French-style public finance and expense management systems, for example, means that their ability to discuss its desirable features and reforms is hampered. High turn-over leaves them little opportunity to grasp the complexity of Mali's governance system. Several aid agencies (such as the French embassy and the European Commission) deplore the fact that they are still deprived of the human resources needed to lead the policy dialogue with the government they yearn for. In the former case, they mention that the majority of aid officials have mostly worked on aid projects during their careers, with a specialized technical focus in one policy area (water, agriculture, education, etc.) and one geographical setting (village or sometimes region), and that this sometimes prevents them from having a broad understanding of the overarching national development strategy embedded in the PRSP. Some apparently also lack the diplomatic, political negotiation skills required by the transition to budget support. In the latter case, lack of personnel and work overload seem to limit opportunities for policy dialogue: in Mali, the European delegation is composed of young contractual agents with little experience, and they are overwhelmed by the number of programmes to follow up.

All in all, the "unlikely patchwork of stupid indicators" can offer the Malian government relative bargaining power:

*This oscillation serves the government; it has a meaning and a function. Conflicts of interest over power help the government to avoid solving problems [identified and raised by donors] and answering donor questions. Fragmentation in the negotiation process and chaos are not only due to a lack of technical capacity (...). The impossibility to read and understand the matrix plays a role in the negotiation.*¹³

However, the government's relative power mentioned above should not be taken for granted: control over the PRSP evaluation process is subject to constant negotiations. Comparing two

versions of the PRSP implementation joint assessment framework – the first version, elaborated mainly in the context of the Malian Budget in early 2007, and an updated version that includes donor revisions – is very useful for highlighting the different conceptions and objectives of donors and the Government of Mali in relation to the matrix. In the first version of the document (République du Mali, 2008), the majority of indicators (66 out of 88) are activity indicators, which means indicators referring to activities or actions by the Malian government, such as: participate in Economic Partnership Agreements, negotiations with donors, organize a week on regional integration, produce audits or disseminate reports or databases. Indicators reflecting results or impact were very scarce (22 out of 88, i.e. 25 per cent). In a later version that includes donor comments and preferences (République du Mali, February 2008), 49 indicators refer to policy results and impact on poverty reduction, with only 14 indicators referring to government actions or activities. For some key informants, ‘the noose is tightening’ for the Malian government, as donors apply increasing pressure to impose their good governance tools, to discuss policies and to assess their outputs.

Confusion for Action: Constraints and Incentives within Aid Agencies

On the donor side, confusion and opacity in the joint assessment framework enable each agent to deal with its own constraints and pursue its own interests. Since donors are accountable to their Parliaments and citizens or to their member-States, with the transition towards GBS, they ask for a set of guarantees on the use of funds that explain the proliferation of conditionalities and performance indicators. Under such circumstances, the possibility that GBS, because it is fungible, can provide more sovereign power to recipient governments to use the funds to pursue their own preferences, is practically limited. But donors also have an imperative – and experience strong pressure from their headquarters – to disburse aid funds. Indeed, the capacity to spend or lend money is often a key element in assessing the performance of individuals or institutions in the aid community. In this context, the ambiguity of the matrix is useful in creating a state of permanent negotiations and re-assessment that helps to allow two important

institutional goals to be met: bringing apparently objective proof that funds are being efficiently managed, while leaving some space for discretion in approving disbursement,¹⁴ despite recent commitments towards partnership with the Malian government and donor institutions.¹⁵

Because indicators perform an important function for both donors and the Government of Mali, data can be interpreted in a flexible way – and even manipulated jointly by the actors involved during negotiations. For example, in 2007, in an assessment of policy in the sector of decentralization, EU agents did not measure the communes' [i.e. local communities] *actual* access to funds (as initially agreed upon), but their *potential* access to funds in order to reach the initially set target and disburse further aid tranches. This led one NGO representative to state that “they [both donors and the Malian government] all make the most of this system of indicators”.¹⁶

Before turning to the next section, a clarification is needed: first, it is not claimed here that intentionality did exist *a priori*, nor that the current state of the matrix is the result of deliberate strategies by the actors involved. As RBM tools were unknown to most actors, its introduction was an uncertain process; and given that the donor community and the Malian government encompass heterogenous actors and interests, the creative use and instrumental role of the matrix highlighted in this article ought to be considered as the social product of the negotiation process rather than the logical and predictable outcome of deliberate strategies deployed by well-identified actors. However, the matrix has important effects on the aid relationships and politics being played out in Mali.

The Effects of Data in Aid Relationships and Governmentality

Dissimulation

Ultimately, relying on ‘the magic of data’ creates a political economy of ruse and dissimulation, to the extent that “the current *proliferation of impossible-to-meet targets* could lead, because of the ‘social pressure’ felt at the level of technical departments, to a *drop in the quality, and even the sincerity, of the data produced and published*” (Lohle-Tart Louis, 2005: 21). This will probably lead the Government of Mali – which, despite

donor support and involvement, remains the main producer and provider of the country's poverty data – to falsify data, or, in a context of weak statistical capacity, to choose the numbers that better show progress.

Such problems associated with RBM are by no means specific to Mali, or to the developing world: the same practices can be observed, to varying degrees, in the industrialized countries. The introduction of results-based management since 2001 has led to a situation where “all means were used to hide, to hijack indicators, to meet their numbers at the expense of result, in brief to protect themselves.... which encouraged administrations to lead a double life” (Trosa, 2006: 61). Therefore, RBM techniques could act as an impediment to the transparency of decision-making and the accountability of public policy in Mali.

Depoliticization and Hegemonic Power

Some of the interviewees involved in the aid sector in Bamako complain about the rise of technocracy in aid practices, fearing that the growing focus on and excessive concern with procedures and indicators might be at the expense of substantive reflexions about the final – qualitative – goals of aid and meaning of development in the long-term (De Lucca and Raffinot, 2007: 207-8). Strict and short-sighted goals and timeframes tend to narrow the scope of attention and ignore the complex dynamics of policy reform and its effects. This rise of technocracy denounced by actors on the ground reflects and shapes the apparent depoliticization of aid (Ferguson, 1994) and conveys an instrumental conception of the state and politics (Peñafiel, 2008).¹⁷ The emphasis on apparently consensual and technical targets linked to poverty reduction tends to depoliticize political processes and bestows unwarranted legitimacy to the active involvement of international experts in domestic policy processes. In sub-Saharan African countries, this involvement becomes institutionalized, routinized, banal and hence unquestioned. Last but not least, bureaucratization is a social machine for producing indifference. When actors talk about *poverty* primarily through quantified data instead of talking about people's *misery*, they euphemize the human implications of poverty and throw a veil over the *causes* of global and domestic inequalities (Bayart, 2008).¹⁸ The reference to poverty reduction

and the shift to a more technocratic discourse obscure the fact that the final objective of the new aid agenda is to pursue and further embed neoliberal reforms in the South. In this process, the ‘magic’ of highly imperfect data becomes a way to diffuse neoliberalism as a way of life, not only as a macro-economic project, in which individuals feel powerless and dispossessed (Bayart, 2008).¹⁹ Framing the political debate in technocratic and quantified terms tends to marginalize the ‘non experts’ in the policy debates. Ferguson points to a growing discursive gap between African leaders and their populations as the morally-grounded, popular idioms that used to nurture political discourse and economic plans in sub-Saharan Africa have been displaced by the “economistic language of international technocracy” that is promoted by the international financial institutions (Ferguson, 2006: 77).

Conclusion: the Role of Data in Post-colonial Contexts in Perspective

Introduced in the US, the UK and Canada in the 1990s, RBM was considered by international donors as a means to enhance their legitimacy and improve reform processes in developing countries. Interestingly enough, this global management tool inevitably takes a different path and meaning when articulated in site-specific local contexts. In Mali, while it fails to achieve its stated objective to reform the state in line with poverty reduction goals, it has nevertheless generated some changes in public policy processes and aid relationships. Since donors and the Government have different priorities and agendas to promote and face different constraints, the matrix’s ambiguity is instrumental for the actors involved. The Malian government uses it to gain access to international funds by demonstrating commitment and results, but also to limit donor dominance of decision-making processes. Donors, on the other hand, can exert permanent influence over government policies through micro-management while keeping their discretionary power on aid disbursement decisions, despite claims of partnership and donor coordination, and can use data alternatively as tools for sanction or compliance. If the PRSP targets are not reached, all actors are aware that further negotiations and adjustments are still possible. In the end, what is negotiated is control over government policy as well as the ad hoc definition and pursuit of specific

development outcomes.

Quantified knowledge has always served as a tool of intermediation, a *lingua franca* and a pidgin²⁰ for hegemonic transaction and interaction between the metropolis and the South – “people from the bottom, the top and elsewhere” (Bayart, 2008).²¹ The data used in Mali differed from one period to the next: their nature, meaning and uses have evolved along the continuum. Before colonialism came to an end, measuring focused predominantly on the efficiency of colonial rule (Bonnetcase, 2008: 38). With the increasing involvement of international organizations in the emerging field of development in the aftermath of World War Two, the objective for French colonial rulers was to justify their presence overseas and comply with the new requirement to produce standardized indicators allowing for international comparison between countries (Bonnetcase, 2008: 162). After independence in 1962, data contributed to the formation and legitimacy of the newly created Malian state, and to supervise the development process through planning. The Egyptian dependency theorist Samir Amin, who personally participated in drafting the first national development plan under the socialist Modibo Keita, documents how this plan was made possible through the use of basic statistics and rough estimates on national resources and needs (1965). However, the plan had a strong performative role in political action, and the data it contained were thought of as key in launching the yearned-for ‘take-off’ phase through statist and socialist policy. Later, sources of data production became diversified (Bonnetcase, 2008: 186), a trend accelerated by the 1974 food crisis in the Sahel. The increasing intervention of international organizations and NGOs generated considerable new data production (as these latter actors were willing to assess nutrition practices and needs in the Sahel) whose quality was often weak and contested. African leaders played an active role both in exposing the crisis to the international media and institutions and the production of food-related data.

Quantified indicators have become central as poverty reduction was placed high on the international aid agenda. Poverty data now stems primarily from external (donor) demands, conceptions and objectives. Control through the magic of data persists, and is now more exerted from the outside than ever, except of course for the colonial era. Whereas data was aimed

(even in an idealized way) at fostering development and ‘catching-up’ after independence though national planning, in the contemporary era data is crucial in state reform and *ex post* international evaluation of the national poverty reduction strategy. Quantified goals and indicators are no longer a tool for guiding the development process, but a means for dealing with extroversion and dependence and reproducing aid relationships on unequal terms, thus reflecting a self-referential development apparatus “geared toward ensuring its own self-perpetration” rather than toward “‘developing’ external objects (poor economies, deprived actors)” (Gould, 2008: 8).

This extroverted, technocratic mode of government of course raises the question of legitimacy – the foundations of international donors’ ‘right’ to intervene – and the related question of political responsibility and accountability. As a consequence, the alienation of popular sovereignty through bureaucratization can act as a strong impediment to the consolidation of democracy – i.e. a political system allowing the citizens in societies to make collective choices according to their perceived priorities, values and circumstances – in aid-dependent countries like Mali.

Endnotes

1. Doctoral candidate in Politics and International Relations at the *Institut d'Etudes Politiques* in Paris (*Sciences-Po*) and lecturer in Politics at Paris I-Panthéon Sorbonne University. Email: isa_berga@yahoo.fr. This article is based on an analysis of the existing literature and interviews carried out during six months of fieldwork in Bamako in 2007 (February-April and September-December) for her PhD research and a research projet led by the Global Economic Governance Programme based at the University of Oxford (UK). Over sixty interviews were conducted with Malian civil servants (in the main ministries and the PRSP technical Unit), aid representatives and technical assistants, consultants and aid experts, and also some civil society representatives.
2. One important limitation of applying this approach to development issues lies in the context-specificity of the governmentality framework. According to Foucault himself, governmentality is a property of late capitalism and a feature of ‘advanced’ liberal democracies in a Western cultural context (Gould, 2008: 84-85).
3. Interviews with donor representatives, Bamako, November and December 2007.

4. Atelier à mi-parcours du CSLP 2002-2006, Bamako, July 2004 (translation by the author).
5. The unit, which is attached to the Malian Ministry of Economy, is in charge of drafting, implementing and following up on the PRSP.
6. Boris Samuel, public finance management expert in West Africa, Interview with the author, Paris, April 2008.
7. M. Reveyrand, French Ambassador to Mali, Interview with the author, Bamako, November 2007. Emphasis added.
8. Interview with the author. Bamako, March 2007.
9. Boris Samuel, *opcit*, emphasis added.
10. Interview with the author, November 2007.
11. Expert in statistics in West Africa and technical assistant in Mali. Interview with the author, electronic message, April 2008, emphasis added.
12. Tuaregs are a nomadic population living in the Sahel, and whose integration in the nation state has been problematic. They periodically rebelled, most notably in 1963, 1990, and most lately in 2006–7, which first led to repression and then to negotiated settlements. Uprisings were followed by military intervention of the national army in 2008 and 2009.
13. Boris Samuel, *opcit*, emphasis added.
14. It is interesting to note that the functional dimension of ambiguity, vagueness and malleability of global rules and norms has been discussed by authors working in other areas. For example, Béatrice Hibou has shown the confusion and uncertainty that prevails over trade openness versus protectionism measures in West Africa (Hibou, 1994). On the other hand, Jacqueline Best suggests against common wisdom that ambiguity can play a valuable role in international political and economic stability, and that mechanisms that accommodate a certain measure of constructive ambiguity are likely to be more effective than those that deny the instability of markets seek to pursue perfect transparency (2005).
15. Boris Samuel, *opcit*, emphasis added.
16. Director of an international NGO present in Mali. Interview with the author, Bamako, November 2007.
17. Peñafiel Ricardo, presentation at the seminar on the political economy of data, EHESS, Paris, April 2008.
18. Jean-François Bayart, seminar on the political economy of data, *opcit*.
19. Jean-François Bayart, seminar on the political economy of data, *opcit*.
20. The term ‘pidgin’ refers to the languages derived from English that were created during the colonial times in British possessions and permitted communication between the colonizers and the colonized.

21. Jean-François Bayart, seminar in Historical Sociology of Economics on poverty, Sciences-Po/Centre d'Etudes et de Recherches Internationales (CERI), 27.11.2008.
22. For example, some authors argue that state sovereignty is the best institution and framework to establish clear lines of political authority and responsibility (e.g. Bickerton, Cunliffe and Gourevitch, 2007).

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