

Social network analysis as an innovative tool for development

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Social network analysis is a fast growing field of research whose main interest is in the links between actors. By examining social actors through their effective relational contacts, social network analysis provides a realistic view of the flows of capital, information, and resources that potentially cut across social groups or categories, such as tribes, villages, or social classes. The objective of our presentation is to highlight how social network analysis is increasingly seen as an empowerment tool for local communities and NGOs, and as an intervention tool for governmental and international organizations that seek to enhance trade, cross-border cooperation or food security.

The first part of the discussion is illustrated with a network analysis of cross-border trade in West Africa. Examining the network organization of 136 large traders in two border regions between Niger, Nigeria, and Benin, we show that, in a business environment where transaction costs are extremely high, decentralized networks are well adapted to the various uncertainties induced by long-distance trade. We also find that long-distance trade relies both on the trust and cooperation shared among local traders, and on the distant ties developed with foreign partners from a different origin, religion or culture. Studying the spatial structure of trade networks, we find that in those markets where trade is recent and where most of the traders are not native of the region, national borders are likely to exert a greater influence than in those regions where trade has pre-colonial roots.

The second part of the presentation discusses the preliminary results of an ongoing survey on cross-border cooperation conducted by the Sahel and West Africa Club at the OECD in which we map how policy actors cooperate in three West African regions (Liptako Gourma, Senegal River and Lake Chad). In addition to showing how actors may influence decisions in an informal way, a relational approach such as the one adopted here constitutes a promising field of research that has, thus far, only been explored by a handful of studies. Our contribution suggests that a better understanding of the overall structure of policy networks can improve the coordination between the various partners (aid donors, regional organizations, private actors, state actors, local municipalities) involved in cross-border cooperation. This approach can lead actors to better understand what their conflicting or cooperative goals are, how they influence each other, and, after group discussions, how the network could evolve with an aim to increase cross-border governance at the local and regional level.

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