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## Creative bureaucracy: Balancing power in irrigation administration in northern Ghana

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Wolfram Laube

## Creative Bureaucracy:

Balancing power in irrigation  
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# Creative Bureaucracy: Balancing power in irrigation administration in northern Ghana

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## Abstract

Since irrigation development in northern Ghana has started, the natural resources water and land within irrigation schemes have officially become the property of the government. The management of these resources has been put in the hands of an irrigation bureaucracy that is supposed to ensure a sustainable and efficient use of these resources. However, the irrigation bureaucracy does not operate in a vacuum. The irrigation bureaucracy's control over land is contested and land use decisions are influenced by various actors, such as farmers, village committees, chiefs, earth priests and local politicians, which pursue their own political interests and refer to local institutional frameworks that collide with official legislation.

To maintain their control of resources, irrigation bureaucrats need to carefully balance power and interests. State bureaucrats rather than taking hegemonic decisions – try to negotiate resources and outwit other actors in order to maintain authority and obtain legitimacy, even if they are not always able to determine actual decision making. In order to live up to their responsibility, and to defend their authority, they not only refer to power and legislation emanating from the state, but take a pragmatic/opportunistic approach in which short-term alliances with local 'big men' as well as references to 'traditional' and 'neo-traditional' norms are of importance. This is typical for the performance of African bureaucracies in (rural) areas where state hegemony has been partially established, but where the control of resources continues to be negotiated between different powerful actors, with reference to competing institutional regimes. Here, administration is less bureaucratic control via a fixed set of official regulations, but the creative working of political arenas that are earmarked by competing sources of power and normative frameworks.

Keywords:

Africa, Ghana, bureaucracy, irrigation, natural resource management, polycentric governance

## Introduction

Since irrigation development in northern Ghana has started in the late 1960s, the natural resources water and land within irrigation schemes have officially become the property of the government. The management of these resources has been put in the hands of an irrigation bureaucracy that is supposed to ensure a sustainable and efficient use of these resources. However, the irrigation bureaucracy does not operate in a vacuum. The irrigation bureaucracy's control over land is contested and land use decisions are influenced by various actors, such as farmers, village committees, chiefs, earth priests and local politicians, which pursue their own economic and political interests and often refer to local institutional frameworks that collide with official legislation.

To maintain their control of resources, irrigation bureaucrats need to carefully balance power and interests. Taking the encroachment of ecological reserves in an irrigation scheme as an example, it will be shown how state bureaucrats rather than taking hegemonic decisions try to negotiate resources and outwit other actors in order to maintain authority and obtain legitimacy, even if they are not always able to determine actual decision making. In order to live up to their responsibility, and to defend their authority, they not only refer to power and legislation emanating from the state, but take a pragmatic/opportunistic approach in which short-term alliances with local 'big men' as well as references to 'traditional' and 'neo-traditional' norms are of importance.

The power to run the irrigation scheme according to official regulations has also decreased since the Economic Recovery Programs (as Structural Adjustment Programs were called in Ghana) have led to a restructuring of irrigation management. While budgets, apart from funds generated through water levies and the provision of tractor services, are still provided by the central government, the irrigation bureaucracy has been turned into a parastatal company. In the process project staff has been largely reduced and effective control of the large irrigation scheme has become impossible. At same time successful democratisation in Ghana has introduced new forms of party-political interventions. Local politicians trying to favour their cronies and in search for support for their campaign work are likely to interfere in irrigation management and the allocation of resources. Being still dependent on government funding for the project as well as for political support for their personal careers irrigation bureaucrats are likely to give in to political pressures, even they disagree.

The situation is typical for the performance of African bureaucracies in (rural) areas where official legislation has been partially established, but where the control of resources continues to be negotiated between different powerful actors, with reference to competing institutional regimes and interests. Administration is less bureaucratic control via a fixed set of official regulations, but the creative working of political arenas that are earmarked by competing sources of power and normative frameworks.

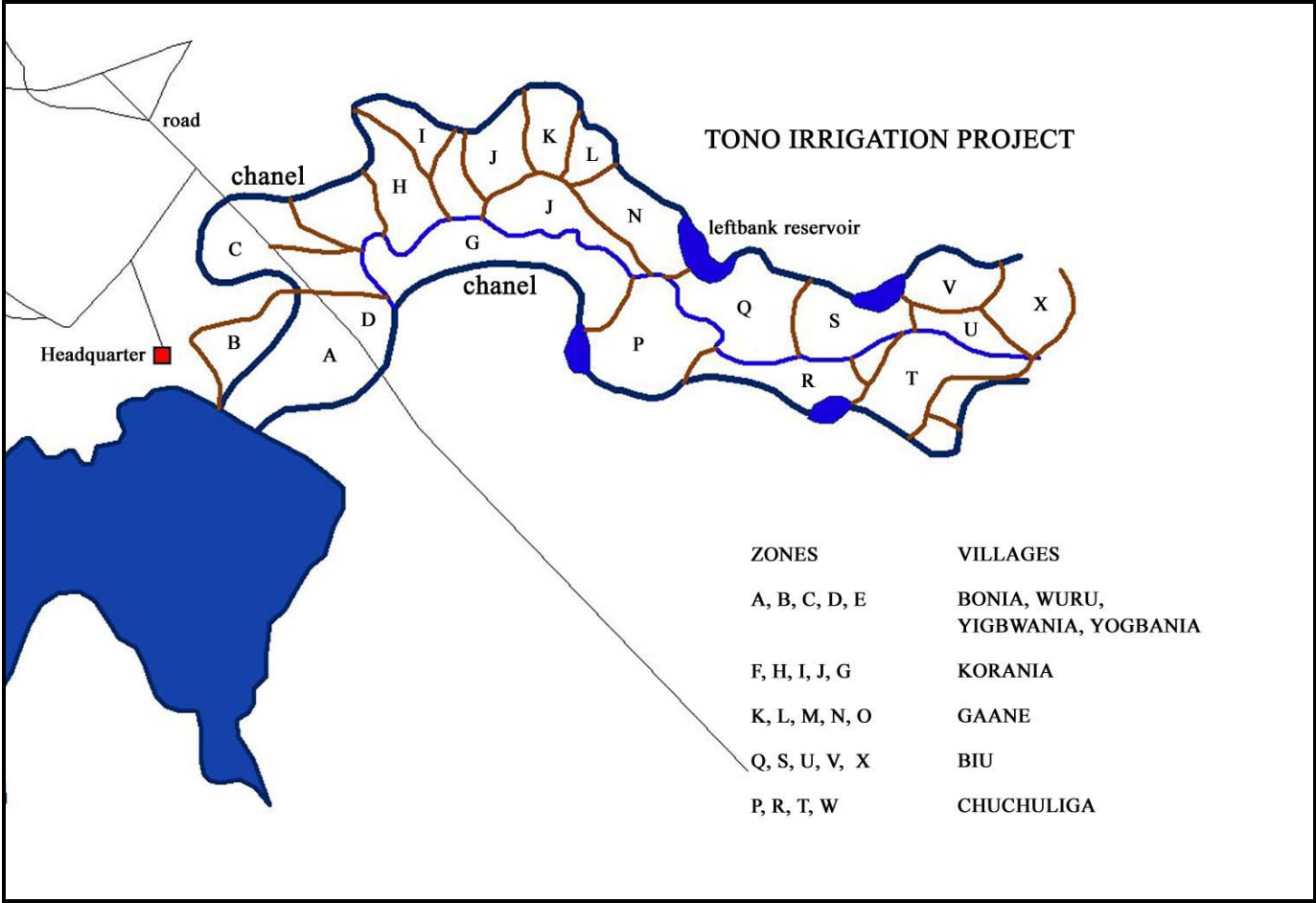
This paper tries to show the creative workings and manoeuvring that surround irrigation management in northern Ghana. An overview of the history and current state of the irrigation scheme and the development of patterns of land allocation will provide the necessary background to understand the issues and interests at stake. In the following, the different actors involved in the running of the project are introduced with their different interests, strategies and sources of power. Using the example of the encroachment of environmental buffer zones in the Tono irrigation scheme I will show how actual decision making and the allocation of resources is taking place in the local political arena.

## The Tono Irrigation Project

The Tono irrigation scheme was build as an attempt to integrate local producers in the national economy and to expand the production of much-needed staple foods for the urban populations of the Ghana's South, which had to be imported at high cost. The completion of the Tono irrigation project was the result of a long, opaque and wasteful process, which made it one of the most expensive irrigation

schemes ever constructed worldwide.<sup>1</sup> The project started in 1975 during the NRC/SMC military regime and at a time when corruption was rife in Ghana. The construction process was slow and ridden with regional and personal favouritism (Bening, 1999); (Konings, 1986). The scheme was built by Taylor Woodrow, an international construction company based in Great Britain. The management of the project was initially the responsibility of Tate & Lyle Engineering Services, another British multinational which operated on behalf of the Irrigation Development Agency until 1981. The contracts with Taylor Woodrow and Tate & Lyle included very favourable conditions with regard to the conditions of payment and the amenities that were offered to the expatriate staff. After the Rawling's revolution, the expatriate management left and the project came under the control of a Peoples Defense Committee (PDC). In 1983, the largely incompetent PDC transferred its powers to a newly established parastatal, the Irrigation Company of the Upper Region (ICOUR).

Figure 1 Map of the Tono irrigation project



At the time of completion, the Tono irrigation project was Ghana's largest irrigation scheme (Map 3-3). In 1978, a 5 km long dam was completed, which created an artificial lake with a surface area of 1860 hectares, which could store 93 million m<sup>3</sup> of water – 37 million m<sup>3</sup> of which can be used for irrigation. The development of the irrigation infrastructure and the preparation of farm plots (clearing, levelling, and bonding) continued until 1985. The original outlay targeted the development of more than 2400 hectares of irrigable land. The irrigation plots were served by main canals (left bank and right bank) with an overall length of 42 km and a network of laterals and sub-laterals of a further 210 km. Additionally, a total of 120 km of access roads were created (Asare, 2002; Salifu, 1998).

<sup>1</sup> Construction costs were as high as USD 40,000-50,000 per hectare. Only 25% of the funds were directly paid for by the Ghanaian government, while the rest was financed by loans from the British and Canadian governments.

The construction was preceded by compulsory land expropriation in eight villages. Local compounds, farms and fruit trees were destroyed. The government had to compensate the local population, but the level of compensations set aside for the population to be resettled was meagre and parts were allegedly pocketed by local chiefs. Uprooted from their ancestral grounds and deprived of any meaningful form of compensation, the construction of the Tono irrigation scheme was a traumatic experience for a large number of local peasants (Konings, 1986). Local peasants were not able to resist the project management, which was backed by the ruling military government and some local chiefs.

There were virtually no incidents of open opposition, and resistance was only offered with the 'weapons of the weak'. Infrastructure owned by the project was consciously destroyed, commercial farms plundered and destroyed and false identities and information given to the project management.

The Tono irrigation project officially aimed at the involvement of local peasants from the beginning as the government had officially shifted its focus from commercial to small-scale farmers. After farming actually started in 1979, priority in the allocation of land was to be given to those farmers who had been expropriated during the construction of the project. While there were attempts to put people back on their original lands close to their ancestral homes, the size of the plots allocated to small-scale farmers was to be limited. Dislocated farmers and other small-scale farmers were to get up to 0.5 acres of irrigable land, while the remaining land was given to commercial farmers, who could get up to 30 acres of land (Konings, 1986). However, despite official claims to regulate access to land in favour of displaced and other indigenous farmers, the practice was rather different. Illegal and extralegal practices continued to prevail throughout the phase of continuing project expansion between 1979 and 1986 (Konings, 1986).

"As the project was further developed year after year, ever new areas were taken under irrigation. To entice reluctant local farmers to start farming in the irrigation scheme, the project management ran a support program during the first dry season in which newly developed plots were to be farmed. Although this program was targeting local small-scale farmers it was actually a group of project managers, local administrators, businessmen and politicians who monopolised the free farm services and shared the fertilizer and chemicals amongst themselves. These people moved their farms as the project expanded and took advantage of virgin soils as well as free inputs every year." (Interview with ICOUR staff, 21.02.03)

The project management strictly controlled the farming practices and crops that the farmers were growing on the irrigated fields. The idea was that irrigation development had been too costly to allow farmers to engage in extensive farming practices and the cultivation of low yielding local crop varieties. Since one of the main purposes of the project was the production of foodstuffs for sale in the south the focus was on the intensive cultivation of cash crops. The cultivation of rice, groundnuts, sorghum, maize, and vegetables was promoted, while millet, the locally preferred crop, was prohibited. Later, the focus shifted almost entirely to rice and vegetables and occasionally Soya beans. To achieve high yields, improved seed varieties were provided to the farmers. The project management also controlled the farming methods. Initially, extension officers organized the entire production process. They arranged for mechanized land preparation as local forms of land preparation were prohibited, ordered fertilizer and irrigated the farms while the farmers mainly provided labour. On the one hand, such initiatives were necessary, as the local peasants had no irrigation experience at all, and agricultural extension was certainly needed. On the other hand, the focus on high input farming forced farmers into capital-intensive production patterns in order to boost production. As local small-scale farmers lacked the necessary capital to pay for the inputs needed for intensive production they were given loans, which were repayable immediately after harvest. However, the forced introduction of intensive farming left the farmers vulnerable:

"The low yield most peasants obtained on their small plots (a large part of the maize crop failed because the area was too wet), coupled with the increased production costs, made it simply impossible for some peasants to repay their loans to the bank. As a result, some plots on the project site are now lying fallow, for the peasants concerned could no longer obtain, or would no longer apply for, new loans from the bank. The danger is that these peasants

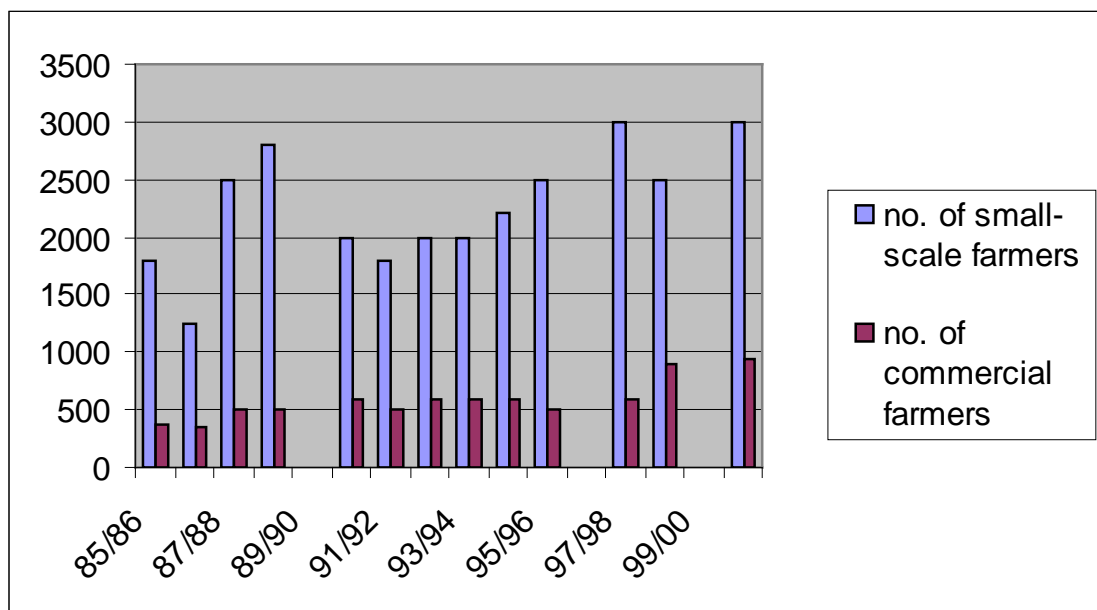


are being forced ... to borrow money so as not to lose the allocated plot... otherwise they will be replaced by commercial farmers." (Konings, 1986)

An additional risk for small-scale farmers was the delay and failure of agricultural support services and timely input delivery. Despite the fact that the project management insisted on intensive production methods and prescribed the method of land preparation and the use of fertilizer, it was not always able to ensure the early preparation of farms by tractors and the timely supply of agricultural inputs. The failure to deliver the services and inputs the farmers were forced to take credits for, endangered the yields of small-scale farmers, who nevertheless had to pay back their loans. The fact that loans had to be paid back immediately after the harvest, when prices were usually lowest, forced the peasants to sell their produce at low prices and therefore further decreased the returns they could obtain from rainy-season farming.

As the result of the project's frequent failure to deliver essential services, meager profits on small plots, and repayment difficulties, the number of small-scale farmers willing to farm within the project decreased considerably. Farmers who were not able to pay their debts and could, therefore, not apply for further loans, had to pull out, as they lacked the means for land preparation, irrigation levies as well as for fertilizer and chemicals. These problems accumulated when the subsidies on land preparation and fertilizer for small-scale farmers were removed in the dry season of 1989/90 and the input prices rose sharply (ICOUR, 1992), as Ghana was undergoing structural adjustment.

*Figure 2 Number of dry-season small-scale and commercial farmers in Tono, 1985 -2000*



(Source: Compiled from ICOUR's Corporate Plans of 1992, 1997-2000 and 2002)

The effects can be clearly seen in the changing number of small-scale farmers that were able to farm in Tono over the years (see fig. 2). While their number increased till the 1989/90 dry season when 2800 small-scale farmers were registered, it dropped considerably after subsidies had been abolished, and reached 1800 peasants in the 1991/92 dry season. The decline of smallholder participation led to the reallocation of plots in the project area. People without land in the project area were able to obtain access to plots, and farmers were able to increase their acreage. Furthermore, land that been put under the control of villages was reallocated to commercial farmers when plots lay fallow.

Following budget cuts at the end of the 1980s as part of the Economic Recovery Program, ICOUR was forced to scale down its operations and laid off a large number of workers. While the overall number of ICOUR employees (head office, Tono, and Veve) decreased from 415 in 1988 to 217 in 1991, the number of staff working in the Tono project dropped from 152 in 1988 to 55 in 1991.

Anticipating the reduction in its operational capacities and faced with the difficulty of debt repayments and farmer control, ICOUR embarked on a program of small-scale farmer participation. During the dry season 1987/88, in each of the 8 villages in the Tono project a Village Committee (VC) consisting of all registered irrigation farmers was established. The VCs took over the allocation of all land provided to a specific village. They were charged with the responsibility of repairing canals, clean laterals and sub-laterals, and to allocate irrigation water within the laterals and sub-laterals. Furthermore, they became responsible for the handling of land preparation credit schemes and the collection of irrigation levies.

In the mid-1990s, the interest of small-scale farmers in irrigated dry-season farming revived. This was due to steep increases in rice prices at that time and the less restrictive control of farmer's agricultural production. From the dry season of 1995/96, irrigable land for dry season farming in the project area became scarce. The demand for irrigable land has not decreased since 1995 and lowland rice plots are now very difficult to get during the dry season. Land scarcity combined with sectional disputes over chieftaincy, and quarrels over the composition of the VC's executive have led to severe conflicts within the project.

As has been stated above, during the late 1980s ICOUR started to reduce its operations in the irrigation scheme. It is still responsible for the overall maintenance and repair work in the project, although the poor condition of the project infrastructure is an indication of the low level of effectiveness of project management. ICOUR continues to provide technical services, to run farm trials and occasionally promotes new seed varieties, but many of its services mainly benefit commercial farmers. This is due to the fact that most employees of ICOUR especially at the middle and senior level of administration - despite regulations prohibiting any large farming by staff members - are very active commercial farmers themselves (Tonah, 1993). They cultivate large tracts of land in zone V and in other parts of the project, which are still under the direct control of the project management, and eagerly use the remaining project assets - tractors and combine harvesters - for their own benefits. Credit packages are mainly shared among the staff of ICOUR, MOFA and a limited number of well known commercial farmers. Small-scale farmers only get credit in the form of the delayed payment of water levies, although ICOUR usually tries to make sure that they pay before the beginning of the farming period. Of late, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) and World Neighbours, an international NGO, have started new credit schemes for farmer groups, but so until 2007 credits have been rather small and disbursement frequently delayed.

While still formally in control of the overall project, ICOUR has lost most of its control over the individual farmers. Co-management of the VCs and the involvement of neo-traditional authorities has shifted the balance of power within the project and led to a situation in which different types of actors can try to actively pursue their own strategies with regard to access to land and irrigation water within the project area. Politicians, district administrators, project management and staff, chiefs, earthpriests, commercial and small-scale farmers are the main actors, who influence the natural resource regimes in the research area. Regulations imposed by the government as well as the competition and negotiation processes amongst different actors have led to multiple and changing natural resource regimes.

## **The Actors: Motivations, Objectives, Strategies and Bargaining Power**

Small-scale farmers, commercial farmers, earthpriests and landowners, chiefs, VC executives, members of the project management, as well as local and regional politicians are the major actors involved in the local natural resource regime in Biu. However, awareness needs to be raised for the fact that categorizations always entail an oversimplification of the complex local situation. Many actors do not neatly fit into a single category, but can have various roles at the same time. The members of ICOUR's staff, for example, are not only civil servants who strive to efficiently and effectively run the irrigation project, but most of them are at the same time commercial farmers with vested interests in the irrigation project. The same is true for chiefs, politicians and assemblymen and members of the VC's executive. It needs to be kept in mind that actors have overlapping roles and conflicting interests.

## Irrigation Bureaucracy

The formally most powerful actors with regard to the management and allocation of natural resources is certainly the project manager and the irrigation bureaucracy of the Tono irrigation project. The PM, on behalf of the irrigation company, has to oversee the overall project and has the final responsibility for the allocation of land and water within the Tono irrigation scheme. Although large parts of the project area have been allocated to the various VCs through land tenure agreements, ICOUR still reserves the right to interfere with the lands thus allocated, if the VCs are not able to use the land efficiently and/or if other problems, for instance the non-payment of water levies, arise. While the landholders still feel that they are the legitimate owners of the project lands, it is the PM who, according to the official legal perception, administers the allodial title of the project lands on behalf of ICOUR and the President of Ghana, in whom the title is finally vested. From ICOUR's perspective, the land rights that are given to individual farmers through the mediation of the VCs are merely access rights, which largely hinge on the fulfilment of certain conditions. If farmers or farmer groups fail to pay their water levies, or even whole villages start to owe ICOUR money, this may be sufficient reason to threaten the debtors with the withdrawal of water or the reallocation of lands.

In the fulfilment of his duties, the PM has to manage and allocate lands in such a way that "ICOUR becomes a profitable irrigation company, providing services to farmers, recovering operational and management costs, and helping to improve living standards and income of project farmers" (ICOUR, 2002). At the same time, he has constantly make sure that the administrative hegemony, especially the control of water and land, that ICOUR exercises in representation of the Ghanaian government, is maintained as much as possible. While charged with these tasks, the Pm himself, as well as other members of the irrigation bureaucracy is an actor driven by his own interests and objectives and rationalities.

The PM, especially with regard to the allocation of water and land under the direct control of ICOUR, likes to behave like an authoritarian ruler. It is difficult, for instance, for small-scale farmers to contact the PM. Waiting times are often ridiculously long and the PM might leave his office when people have been sitting there for several hours telling them to come back the following day. He makes the small-scale farmers feel that they are at his mercy, and uses the allocation of plots as his benefice, less to attract bribes, but rather to show his power and to gain clients on whose support he might count when needed. He likes to display his authority and attract clients, because despite his official competencies, his real bargaining power is severely limited.

On the one hand, the PM and other members of the irrigation bureaucracy are hampered by their economic interests. They are among the largest commercial farmers in the project and their own economic activities could easily be sabotaged by local farmers if they were really to oppose local communities. The irrigation bureaucracies control over the project is further weakened by political interference. Local actors, especially commercial farmers, who are in disagreement with the decisions of the PM, frequently look for political patronage to have unfavourable decisions of the PM reversed. Any significant unrest among the small-scale farmers also brings politicians to scene, many of whom like to portray themselves as advocates of the masses. Although the politicians, who interfere with the decisions of the irrigation bureaucracy, do not have any mandate to do so, the project management is often reluctant to oppose them. As a civil servant, his career- like all others in the civil service - depends on good political conduct. Furthermore, since ICOUR is heavily subsidized by the government, and depends on continuous political support, political decision makers have to be pampered.

The control that the PM, and ICOUR as a whole, exercises over the natural resources regimes in the project is limited by individual economic and individual as well corporate - political rationalities. However, not all decisions taken by the PM can be explained by utilitarian logic. The fact that over the past years quite a number of acres of land in zone V have been allocated to women farmers and to members of the PM's church is not easily explained by simple cost/profit calculations. When approached for as earthly matters as land, tractors or fertilizer, the PM is used to deliver long spontaneous sermons. During such outbursts of missionising zeal, he frequently explains that he is driven by a deep Christian desire to help the local peasants. He helps the women to get land and has opened the local branch of the Assemblies of God to help "chasing the devil out of the village".

With regard to water, the irrigation bureaucracy oversees the schedules for the distribution of water and tries to ensure the payment of water levies. It is the water bailiffs who largely control the day-to-day allocation of irrigation water according to the water schedules developed by the PM and the project engineer. Nevertheless, they, like all other actors in the Tono project, follow their own ends. Apart from the fulfilment of project rules, water allocations follow two different types of rationalities. While water allocation is supposed to be based on the principle of irrigation efficiency, inclusive local water norms that determine the handling of water resources outside the irrigation scheme also apply to the distribution of irrigation water. Unless some overarching interest interferes, as for instance the enforcement of the payment of water levies in a village in dept, people in dire need of water for their crops are able to get water from the water bailiff even if it is not their turn and they have not yet paid their fees. This is partly so, because access to water is locally perceived as a human right and water is seen as a substance that cannot rightfully be withheld from people in need. Furthermore, some degree of flexibility with regard to the enforcement of water allocation rules precludes conflicts and the destruction of project assets designed for the management of water flows. People will not start to fight for access to scarce water resources and do not break locks or spoil valves in order to divert water to their plots when their needs are taken care of. Apart from this officially sanctioned adoption of the local 'moral economy' of water, the water bailiffs pursue less altruistic and less sanctioned personal objectives. They regularly engage in patterns of irrigation water allocation that favour themselves, and those (mostly commercial) farmers who are either close to them or entice them with the payment of small bribes.

However, through the control of irrigation water, which can be theoretically withheld if orders of the project management are disrespected, the water bureaucracy exercises quite some degree of control over the Tono irrigation scheme. Members of the project of the project bureaucracy, first and foremost the PM, like to display this power in an authoritarian manner, especially in their dealings with small-scale farmers. However, the bureaucratic hegemony is largely compromised by personal and institutional interests, as well as the need to strike a balance between the need to maintain the control of resources on behalf of the state and the need to arrive at workable arrangements with the other powerful actors of the local political arena, who frequently circumvent and subvert the bureaucratic hegemony.

## Village Committee Executives

As structural adjustment, through the reduction of staff and funding, has further reduced the irrigation bureaucracy's ability to exercise effective control of the irrigation scheme, it has parted some of its mandate and responsibilities to village committees (VCs). The VCs consist of all small-scale irrigation farmers of a village. They have executives that should be elected by the irrigation farmers of the villages benefiting from the irrigation scheme every four years (ICOUR). However the chairmen of the executives are usually members of the local earthpriest clans.

The VC executive is charged with the responsibility of ensuring the "socio-economic development of the village" (ICOUR) and to oversee the allocation and management of natural resources within the village's section of the project. Ideally, the members of the VC executive "shall work on a voluntary basis and for no personal gain" (ibid.). That the position of the chairman of the VC is always given to a representative of one of the tinyono-lineages, is to ensure that land allocation and land use within the village lands in the project area are in accordance with the traditional norms and rules. In its current form, the VC itself is a hybrid body that operates along modern as well as traditional institutional lines.

The members of the VC are members of the local community who have their own motivations and objectives, and also follow these in their offices. Since the VC handles the allocation of lands and the payments to ICOUR, a position in the VC executive opens up the possibility for corruption, nepotism and the diversion of resources. Furthermore, these posts have become politicized in villages where different sections or clans struggle over access to project lands. Personal objectives therefore mingle with sectional interests and the ex-officio responsibilities of the executives. The officials of the VC are therefore torn between different objectives.

Especially with regard to land, the actors follow different motives and objectives in different settings. While there is not much land to be allocated anyway, the few plots that cannot be farmed by the registered landholders, and which are not reallocated by those landholders themselves, are in high

demand. While the ordinary farmer without special relationships to the VC finds it difficult to get access to land without paying bribes, VC members can easily allocate land to themselves and their close friends and relatives. Landless farmers frequently reported that they have to bring beer, fowls and other 'small' gifts to the VC before they are given access to land. At the same time members of the VC executive have privileged access to land. Sometimes the project management even has to interfere to avoid excesses.

While not all executives behave in the same way, the temptation to abuse the position seems to be particularly strong and. The bargaining power of the VC executives with regard to natural resources is considerable when it comes to VC lands. Nevertheless, this power is reduced through frequent interferences by the village chiefs and by the irrigation management, both of whom often try to overrule the decisions taken by the VC executives. Such interferences, as well as the excesses of executives, have had de-legitimizing effects and have caused widespread disrespect for the VC executive. Local farmers openly disobey their decisions and will try to get what they want through the village chiefs if the VC executive does not decide in their favour. While the VC executives exercise some power over the allocation of land, they are not involved in the allocation of water at all. All they do is to organize farmer groups for maintenance activities together with the chief irrigators.

## Small-Scale Farmers

Organised in VCs, between 3000 and 4000 small-scale farmers are benefiting from the Tono irrigation project. Small-scale farmers only have access to a limited area of land within the irrigation area and lack the capital to expand their production. Their production is largely for household consumption and only parts of the harvest are marketed. The larger part of their agricultural production is derived from rain-fed farming, mainly outside the project area (Laube, 2007).

For most of the small-scale farmers in the village, irrigation farming is a very important part of their diversified livelihood strategy in which they combine rainy season farming, animal husbandry, irrigation agriculture, wage labour, trading, as well as gathering, hunting and fishing. Despite the fact that some agricultural credit has been extended to them, most of the small-scale farmers lack the capital and workforce to farm large acreages. Small-scale farmers usually economize on agricultural inputs and rely mainly on family labour to complete agricultural tasks. For most of them an expansion of their irrigated land is out of the question and the diversification and securing of their livelihoods is the main objective they pursue.

Traditional norms largely determine the way in which small-scale farmers deal with land matters amongst themselves. Nevertheless, in their dealings with the VC and ICOUR, small-scale farmers are less driven by the concerns dictated by the 'moral economy' of land. As transactions are less socially embedded, and not covered by traditional norms that predate the existence of the irrigation scheme, their behaviour is characterized by utilitarian objectives and by tactics of withdrawal and evasion that can be often found when locals deal with official authorities and the representatives of the state. Farmers do not attend meetings, the payment morale of small-scale farmers is rather low, and cheating of the VC and ICOUR officials is a well accepted behaviour among the peasants, especially when it helps them to avoid payments and assignments.

Since land has become scarce and hardly any land is available from the VC anymore, small-scale farmers have devised alternative strategies to either encroach upon land or to get plots from the VC or ICOUR. While the bargaining power of individual small-scale farmers is very low, they have devised alternative ways to cope with the system. Peasants approach the tinyonos as well as family landholders and ask for their permission to encroach upon project wastelands. In the following they try to get their claims officially acknowledged.

Apart from their ability to shop different forums (Benda-Beckmann, 1981), the real bargaining power of the small-scale farmers lies in the inability of ICOUR, as well as of the local government agencies, to effectively control the huge irrigation project and to ensure complete compliance with rules. While the farmers depend on ICOUR for the timely delivery of irrigation water, ICOUR depends on at least some degree of voluntary compliance and goodwill on the part of the farmers. The aptness of the local population to withdraw from, evade and subvert attempts to control their activities and their ability to

draw on the 'weapons of the weak', i.e., sabotage, theft and deceit, make it difficult for the project management to rely only on the use of force in pushing its policies through. This is even more so because most of the individual representatives of ICOUR or the local administration, who are charged with the responsibility of enforcing regulations and ensuring some degree of compliance with the rules, have their own farms and economic interests in the project area. The official actors are therefore vulnerable and not interested in any misunderstandings that might obstruct their own economic undertakings. Furthermore, there is some degree of political support on which small-scale farmers can count in major disagreements with project management. Politicians are not likely to risk the support of the rural population by insisting on the strict enforcement of project regulations.

## Commercial Farmers

Apart from small-scale farmers ICOUR serves 500 contract farmers with land and water. Most of these are part-time farmers who only farm two or three acres. The number of commercial farmers operating between 10 to 30 acres is actually much smaller and only some 20-30 farmers might belong to the core group of commercial farmers. They are mainly members of the local economic, bureaucratic and political elites living in Navrongo. Absentee-farmers hardly hold any plots in the project area and only some regional politicians have been assigned plots in the recent past. The senior staff of ICOUR as well as the field-level and senior staff of MOFA is also engaged in commercial agriculture.

While many small-scale farmers mainly engage in subsistence production and consume large parts of their produce themselves, almost the entire produce of commercial farmers is marketed. Being completely involved in market production, their whole operations are based on utilitarian rationalities. Commercial farmers do not engage in the production of the traditional crop varieties under rain-fed conditions. Their main products are rice, tomatoes and, to a much lesser degree, Soya beans. Profits derived from farming may be re-invested in an expansion of farming activities.

Apart from their own capital and machinery, commercial farmers often have easy access to additional resources. They often receive agricultural packages that provide seed, fertilizer, land preparation and water levies on credit, which enable them to farm even larger areas. While small-scale farmers are regarded as "non-credit worthy" (ICOUR, 2002) and will only get mechanized land preparation services if they pay their money in advance, commercial farmers are allowed to partake in agricultural credit packages offered in cooperation with IFAD and local banks, which are designed to either boost crop production or to stimulate the cultivation of rice seed for irrigation projects nation wide.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, MOFA regularly offers highly subsidized agricultural equipment for sale. Tractors or pumps are sold cheaply and on credit, and it is the staff of MOFA itself, as well as other members of the core group of commercial farmers, who are benefiting from such programs.

Most of the commercial farmers produce on land that is under direct control of ICOUR.<sup>3</sup> Living in Navrongo and farming on ICOUR land, the commercial farmers are far removed from the local communities and do not heed local norms of land sharing and reciprocity. On the contrary, commercial farmers can be seen to employ whatever means necessary to get access to as much land as possible. Because the number of commercial farmers is very limited and important personalities of ICOUR, MOFA and the local administrative and political elites are all part of them, commercial farmers have a privileged access to land. Most of them have plots they have been farming for years, but they usually try to arrange for additional plots during the time of land allocation.

Most of the commercial farmers are, in one way or another, engaged in the channelling and distribution of credit packages and subsidized equipment. While they sometimes compete for land, water, and technical equipment, they are bound together by strong common interests.

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<sup>2</sup> ICOUR has been selected by MOFA as a seed grower for the National Soya bean and Quality Rice Production Programs ICOUR (2002). Corporate Plan 2002-2006. ICOUR, Navrongo..

<sup>3</sup> In the past, when land was still abundant, commercial farmers used to farm large areas of land allocated by the VCs. Nowadays, most of the VC's land is used by small-scale farmers and only upland-tomato plots are allocated to commercial farmers either directly by the VC or by ICOUR.

The commercial farmers do not only depend on their good relations to the project management. They are also organized in the Navrongo Vegetable Farmers Association and through their elected representatives are able to influence decisions about farming dates, water levies and the prices for land preparation, since they are represented in the Consultative Committee of ICOUR. Furthermore, some of the commercial farmers have good relations to politicians, whom they support during campaigns. The links between the economic and political elites of the district and the region are particularly close, and commercial farmers are amongst the well known supporters of the political parties. As the interests of the commercial farmers and ICOUR are not always similar, commercial farmers make use of the support of politicians to influence ICOUR's policies.

## Politicians

While initially, politicians from the national and regional level had pervasive influence on the development and the policies of the Tono irrigation project, it is nowadays mainly politicians from the district and sometimes from the regional capital Bolgatanga, who interfere in the management of the project and the allocation of natural resources. The higher ranks of politicians, i.e., the Member of Parliament (MP) or the District Chief Executive (DCE), are usually recruited among professionals from the district who have made their careers in the public service and often work and live in Accra, while party officials and members are usually local residents.

Not surprisingly, politicians have had a large influence over the Tono irrigation project from the onset. The initial expropriation of project land and the creation of state farms on Bui's land were acts which, although covered by law, completely opposed the existing local natural resource regimes and were based on political priorities that had nothing to do with local concerns. Only a few years later, when international as well as national political priorities had changed, the project became officially dedicated to the development of small-scale farming. While, therefore, political agency is obvious in the developments that have shaped the larger structural economic and political embedding of the local political arena, politicians have also always acted within the local realm. Initially, parts of the irrigation scheme were farmed by local and regional politicians, who used their superior political bargaining power to obtain large plots for themselves. As the reduction of subsidies has made irrigation farming less profitable, only a few politicians still take advantage of their position to acquire plots.

Nevertheless, politicians remain important actors within irrigation scheme. As (not only) the Ghanaian political system is built on patronage networks as the main means to organize political support and to attract voters, politicians are very eager to assist their (potential) supporters. Politically well-connected individuals and groups are therefore able to organize political support for their specific interests. To serve and attract clients, politicians use their extensive bargaining power to overrule decisions of the project management. They do so in clear ignorance of the effects their actions have on the efficient and sustainable functioning of the overall project. The management of ICOUR heeds the influence of politicians for a number of reasons. On the one hand, they try to protect the interests of the irrigation company, which depends on the support of local and regional politicians to ensure a continuous flow of government resources for its operation. On the other hand, members of the management are part of the same local 'triangles of accommodation' the politicians belong to and through which power and resources are locally redistributed. Furthermore, as the filling of posts and offices is largely determined by political affiliation and protégé, project staff may fear reprisals, if they disobey the wishes of politicians. Party cadres, MPs and political decision makers from regional and national levels driven by political motivations are therefore able to exercise a considerable degree of bargaining power and can interfere with the decision of the irrigation bureaucracy.

## Earthpriests and Landowners

Irrigation management in the Tono irrigation scheme can not be understood without the influence of traditional and neo-traditional authorities, i.e. earth priests and chiefs. Earthpriests are spiritual leaders who have a special relationship to the land. They usually are perceived to be the direct successors of the

first settlers of a certain area<sup>4</sup>, although they might have received the responsibility over their land from an earthpriest responsible for a much larger territory, as hierarchies of earthpriests do exist. As the first settlers, their ancestors developed special relationships with the natural spirits of the land, which may reside in holy grooves, rocks or rivers and are responsible for the wellbeing of the land, people, livestock, and harvests of a region. They influence the weather and may help to get timely rains or cause droughts or floods, if disrespected. The earthpriests are able to approach the spirits through the mediation of their ancestors and have to perform regular rituals and sacrifices to ensure the spiritual purity of the land and to secure the goodwill of the spirits. Furthermore, they observe the compliance with taboos. If taboos are broken, e.g., the totem animal of local clans is killed or human blood is shed, the earthpriests will have to sacrifice to the spirits to pacify them. Being in charge of the land, the earthpriest holds the allodial title in his territory. He is the ultimate landowner and gives out land to those who want to settle or farm in the area. Land can be obtained by local inhabitants as well as by newcomers as long as it is freely available. For some tokens, such as fowls, tobacco and alcohol, which vary locally, the earthpriest assigns someone a certain piece of land and performs some initial rituals - including sacrifices - to ensure the benevolence of the spirits of the land. Once land is allocated to individuals or families it remains theirs as long as they continue to inhabit or farm it. It can be bequeathed to ones relatives and remains the property of the paternal kinship group. Earthpriests neither sell land nor collect any rents, but those who settle or farm on their territories especially after rich harvests - are expected to send gifts to the house of the earthpriests.

Since the compulsory expropriation of land for the irrigation project, earthpriests and landowners have officially no say in the allocation and management of natural resources within the Tono irrigation scheme. However, the earthpriests and landholders are still important actors within the local political arena of the irrigation scheme. The locally perceived illegitimacy of ICOUR's claim of suzerainty over local land as well as ICOUR's limited power to enforce compliance with its regulations and policies have given some leeway for the re-strengthening of traditional patterns of land allocation and land management.

Local tinyonos continue to perform the traditional rituals and sacrifices that are necessary to appease the local 'gods' of the land or rivers and do so even in the anticipation of the breach of taboos and the misconduct of irrigation farmers, many of whom are not informed about local codes of behavior. In the perception of many locals, the spiritual care that is given by the earthpriests is a prerequisite for the fertility of the land and the prosperity of the farmers. For them their institutional engagement is at least as important as the agronomic and ecological prescriptions and regulations of ICOUR. The local importance of the traditional spiritual realm can be seen from the fact that - apart from one village - throughout the project area the chairmen of the VCs are members of the various earthpriest lineages. The local farmers believe that only members of the earthpriest lineage have the right and the capability to allocate land and collect payments and gifts without committing a spiritual offence.

While especially the tinyonos themselves, and to a much lesser degree their representatives in the VC executive, are expected to perform according to rationalities that reflect the inclusive and altruistic norms characteristic of the local traditions with regard to the allocation and management of land, they are nevertheless not devoid of any selfish and profit-oriented behavior. They like to ask for gifts and small fees for their services and especially tinyonos will expect gifts after a successful harvest. While the VC chairman is engaged in the allocation of plots developed by the project, the tinyonos allocate those lands that have been left undeveloped or where the project infrastructure is dilapidated (e.g., zone X), and had formerly not been allocated to landholding families and clans.

Where land was allocated to individual families prior to the construction of the irrigation scheme, it is the landowners who have the right to reallocate that land to interested farmers. While ICOUR denounces such allocations, it lacks the power to prevent it. The local networks of patronage and the peculiar balance of interest that has developed in Tono has led to a situation where the traditional actors who were formerly ousted from the allocation and management of natural resources within the irrigation

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<sup>4</sup> Claims by earthpriest clans to be first-comers in a certain area, however are frequently contested and so-called latecomers frequently provide competing versions of the settlement history of a certain region.



scheme have partially reclaimed their responsibilities, although they seemingly have the least bargaining power. They allocate and manage land, largely in accordance with local norms and values and derive their bargaining power from their local legitimacy and the vacuum of distributional control that exists over the project's wastelands.

## Chiefs

The chiefs, neo-traditional authorities that base their legitimacy on a newly defined customary law, have become important intermediaries for the national administration at the local level. With the political support of the government, they have frequently been able to usurp power over the allocation and management of natural resources from the earthpriests, who were traditionally responsible. As ICOUR has frequently faced problems with the VCs, the irrigation company has repeatedly used the chiefs as intermediaries for the enforcement of policies and the collection of payments. As a result of this intermediating role, the chiefs have assumed some non-official bargaining power over the allocation of water and land in the irrigation system. They have been able to get some control over the VC, and their requests are frequently taken into account by ICOUR as they are important partners at the village level, which ICOUR does not want to disappoint.

The chiefs use their influence for different purposes. Like other local actors the chiefs are irrigation farmers. Therefore, they have used their influence to obtain relatively large acreages in the zones under control of the VC and in the zones under control of ICOUR. (Laube, 2007). Furthermore, land is allocated to the chiefs' wives and close family. The chiefs are also able to obtain favours from ICOUR and the water bailiffs with regard to privileged access to irrigation water.

However, it is not only privileged access to land and water and the resulting personal economic advantages that the chiefs pursue. They also use their bargaining power as a way of enhancing their position in the competition over power and followers within their villages. In order to attract supporters, the chiefs try to meet the special requests of their clients and try to intervene in decisions made by the VC, as well as ICOUR, for their own political benefit. Village farmers, who cannot get access to official plots and who wish to obtain access to project wastelands (which should officially not be farmed) often go straight to the chiefs, who will then use their position to negotiate for them. However, the chiefs not only exercise their power for the benefit of their clients and friends, but also influence land allocation decisions of the VC to sanction small-scale farmers who have fallen out of favour with them.

The chiefs, despite the fact that they claim to act in coherence with traditional norms and are trying to work for the benefit of the whole village, largely follow the clearly utilitarian rationalities of their individual economic and political agenda and use land issues as tools in their battles for local suzerainty.

## Political Tomatoes: Commercial Pump Farming on Project Wastelands

The foregoing description of the main actors involved in the management and administration of the Tono irrigation scheme has shown that a number of varying motives, objectives, and strategies underlie the practices and strategic conduct of different actors in different realms. In the following, I will use a case that will exemplify this pattern of interaction and show how the irrigation bureaucracy tries to manoeuvre - the local political arena - albeit not always successfully.

At the beginning of the 2002/03 dry season, a debate about the use of project wastelands along the river bed of the Tono River in zones Q, S and U for commercial, pump-irrigated tomato farming unfolded. The conflict developed between the irrigation management especially the PM - on the one side, and commercial farmers on the other. Later, other actors, such as local and regional politicians, chiefs, VCs, tinyonos, and landowners, were roped in. In the debate short-term economic interest was weighed against the long-term economic viability as well as environmental sustainability of the Tono irrigation project.

As has been said before, the lands alongside the river bed of the Tono River were left undeveloped during the time of the construction of the project. The initial decision not to farm these areas was driven by the conclusion that this could lead to the erosion of the river banks, which are regularly flooded during the wet season. Large-scale erosion was believed to result in the siltation of the river bed, which could entail inadequate drainage of the irrigation scheme in the dry season and increased flooding in the wet season. While diminished drainage could lead to water logging and turn lowland areas into non-cultivable swamps during the dry season, increased flooding would prohibit the farming of lowlands during the wet season. Both would pose a threat to the activities of individual farmers, as well as to the sustainability and efficiency of whole project.

Nevertheless, farming alongside the riverbanks has certain advantages for commercial farmers. The riverine land offers highly fertile soils and can be easily irrigated with motorized pumps. Furthermore, the farmers using the water from the river would be independent of ICOUR's water supplies and could start farming early. Good soils and timely farming allow commercial farmers to produce more tomatoes at a better time. The additional profits outdo the relatively high irrigation costs.<sup>5</sup>

Succumbing to the commercial farmers' pressure to allow farming along the river banks, the project management had initially allowed farming in certain riverine areas in the zones belonging to Biu in the 1996/97 dry season. The respective plots, which were still covered by a dense tree canopy, were cleared and the farmers apparently used the ICOUR bulldozer to uproot trees in order to make it possible to prepare the land with tractors. However, only one year later, the farmers were banned from the riverine plots. Ever since their operations along the river banks were banned, commercial farmers have been lobbying for a re-opening of the riverine wastelands for farming.

Although the project management has always refused to give them permission, two commercial farmers - one being a teacher and leading regional politician of the party in power by that time encroached upon the riverine wastelands of zone P in Chuchuliga and started to established their tomato farms there in the 2002/03 dry season. When the PM heard about the encroachment, he called the two farmers to his office and told them to immediately stop their activities. However, the farmer cum politician did not agree with the PM's decision and informed the local MP, who had organized the subsidized pumps with which the two farmers were operating their farms. The MP subsequently called the PM and told him not to stop the farmers, as they had already invested into their plots. Being greatly annoyed but unable to resist the order of the MP, the PM called the farmer cum politician to his office and told him that he would not stop the encroachers from farming any longer, as the MP had interfered on their behalf. The PM nevertheless blamed him and asked him whether he thought it to be right to abrogate project regulations. He told him that he as a teacher and regional party leader should rather obey the rules and set a positive example for the youth and the electorate of the area. Reminded of his public responsibilities and his party position, the farmer apparently agreed to abstain from farming, but the colleague he was working with refused to do so.

Seeing what had happened at zone P, another group of commercial farmers from Navrongo, who had been banned from farming the river banks in the zones Q, S and U, started to increase their pressure on the PM to allow them to farm their former tomato plots again. The PM resisted, but the commercial farmers, using the farms at Chuchuliga as a precedent, approached the regional minister and other government officials at Bolgatanga and asked them to interfere on their behalf.

The representatives of the by new NPP (National Patriotic Party) government, which had just come to power in 2001 were likely to do so. The former NDC (National Democratic Congress) MP for Navrongo had been a deputy minister of MOFA and was able to channel a lot of subsidized farming equipment to the district, which was distributed among the relatively small group of closely connected commercial farmers, politicians, public servants and local businessmen, who in turn supported the MP and the local branch of the NDC. His successor, a NPP-MP took the post of a Deputy Minister for Government Business, Transport and Communication, and his most prestigious project in the district was the establishment of a computer literacy centre. However, being an agronomist who had worked with MOFA before, he too, saw the need to win over the support of the commercial farmers in the area. Therefore he

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<sup>5</sup> Pump farmers within the project area have to pay half the water levy and additionally bear the costs of purchasing, maintaining and running their motorized water pumps.

organized the support of important regional figures from the ranks of the NPP, including the regional minister, to convince ICOUR to drop the ban on riverine farming. The politicians indeed supported the commercial farmers, as this proved to be a cheap way of winning over their support. The regional politicians interfered on behalf of the farmers and the PM was asked to allow farming along the river banks.

As the PM saw that his case was lost, due to the political and administrative support the commercial farmers were able to organize, he tried to stop them by using a different strategy. As has been said above, despite the fact that the government had appropriated the whole project area, project wastelands that have not been developed into irrigable plots are according to general agreement still owned by the original landholders, i.e., tinyonos or individual owners of family land. These owners were the ones, who were actually allocating commercial farmers the land at the river banks. Therefore, operating through the VC executives and village chiefs, whom he informed about the negative effects the farming of the river banks could have on the village farmers, the PM tried to convince the landowners not to allow the commercial farmers to use their respective lands along the river.

However, by the time the VC executives and chiefs talked to the landowners, they had already allocated land to the commercial farmers. In turn they had received traditional tokens and were promised gifts after the harvest by the commercial farmers. Others who had given their land to the commercial farmers, were helped by these to also farm tomatoes. One of the commercial farmers with the largest acreage in and around Tono, had for instance acquired about 10 acres at the river banks. He had gotten his large plot through the mediation of a local tinyono, who had called various landowners and had informed them about the farmer's request for land at the river. At a meeting, the commercial farmer had provided the traditional tokens of millet and three hens for the necessary sacrifices, and additionally brought two gallons of local drink for the landowners. An agreement between earthpriest, the land holders and commercial farmer was arrived at, and the necessary sacrifices were performed at the tinyono's house and at the farm. While the farmer was given access to the desired plots, the earthpriest expected some gifts or cash after the harvest. Furthermore, the commercial farmer had agreed to assist the land owners, who were interested in tomato farming but lacked pumps, with pumping facilities. They had to bear their own farming costs and cost of fuel, while the commercial farmer was going to allow them to use his pumps to irrigate their farms. Other commercial farmers had arrived at similar mutually beneficial agreements with the tinyono and the local land owners. When the VC executives and the chiefs, alarmed by the PM, called a meeting with the commercial farmers and the landholders, allegedly to convince the landowners of the hazardous effects of farming at the river bank, neither the landowners nor the commercial farmers were prepared to listen to their advice. This was especially the case when it became apparent that chiefs and VC seemed to be less interested in the negative effects of the tomato farming, but were rather looking for bribes from the commercial farmers. The commercial farmers just got up and left the meeting, completely ignoring the protests of the chiefs and the VC executives. As neither the chiefs nor the VC had any legitimate means to stop the farming activities, and since it would not have been advisable for them to openly confront the politically backed commercial farmers, tomato farming in the wastelands of zones Q, S, and U continued unhindered. Along the river, an overall area of 40-50 acres was put under tomato cultivation and was still farmed at the dry season 2008/09 – with uncertain consequences for the overall project.

## **Creative bureaucracy: Balancing powers in the local political arena**

As can be seen from this example, and the general explanations above, the control the irrigation bureaucracy is exercising over the Tono irrigation project is far from being complete. The project management's dominance is balanced by counter forces that emanate from the social, economic and political context the irrigation project is embedded in. The weakness of central control, party-political and neo-traditional patterns of patronage and local 'triangles of accommodation' allow various actors- including members of the project management itself- to compromise the official hegemony of ICOUR and have led to the change and erosion of official rules and regulations.

The description of the conflict that unfolded between the project management and the commercial farmers highlights the ways in which politicians interfere with the local natural resource regimes in order to satisfy the members of their political patronage networks, and shows how their influence shapes the bargaining power the various actors are able to exercise. The case also highlights the prevalence of traditional patterns of resource allocation and management that are still prevailing in areas where ICOUR has not been able to establish the necessary infrastructure and lacks the power to effectively control land allocation and management.

The institutional arrangements regarding farming alongside the river bank seemed to be fairly straightforward. As the land had been compulsorily appropriated by the government and put under the management of ICOUR, which had earmarked the areas as environmentally protected zones that were exempted from farming, it was very unlikely that the commercial farmers, who had succeeded in farming the river banks for only one year, would be able to do so again. Nevertheless, the change of government from NDC to NPP and the take-over of power and positions by a new group of politicians created an opportunity for manipulation, which the commercial farmers successfully used to remove the ban on farming. While there was no room for manoeuvre with regard to the farming of environmentally protected areas under the former NDC regime, the commercial farmers were able to exploit the new situation.

The commercial farmers succeeded in employing their political bargaining power to change the project regulations, which the project management tried to enforce with his official authority. The ICOUR management had to yield to the dominant influence of local and regional politicians on whose backing and goodwill the irrigation company as a whole, as well as ICOUR's officers individually, depend.

In order to counterweight political pressure, the PM tried to gain the support of other actors in the local political arena. His strategy was to influence the local landholders through the chiefs and VCs in order to stop the encroachment. While in the case presented above this strategy failed, there have been other cases in which the irrigation bureaucracy has been successful in creatively working the local political arena, in order to overcome their lack of control over the irrigation scheme (Laube, 2007). Irrigation bureaucrats have, for instance, been successful in raising the level of debt repayments by – with the backing of politicians – holding chiefs personally responsible for the payment of irrigation levies in their respective villages.

This examples show that even in a country like Ghana, with a rather 'strong' state and stable political conditions, bureaucratic control of resources remains piecemeal. Straightforward administration according to official regulations is hardly possible as various actors are able to use their bargaining power to influence decision making. This is particularly true as politicians are often interfering bureaucratic decision making. They do so in order to extend their clientilistic networks and power, but at the same time undermine the official institutions of the state they are supposed to represent. To maintain a certain degree of control, and to outweigh political interference, bureaucrats are forced to engage in alliances with varying actors of the local political arena. They have to creatively balance power, but in the process – paradoxically – have to refer to traditional and neo-traditional institutions, which are thus gaining in strength and legitimacy against the official bureaucratic procedures.

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