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# **Wanting Knowledge: Social Science Research and the Demand Factor in a Low-Income Country – The Case of Niger**

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# **Wanting Knowledge: Social Science Research and the Demand Factor in a Low-Income Country – The Case of Niger**

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Although no one remembers exactly when that happened, everyone in Niger knows that former President Mamadou Tandja (terms: 1999-2009) once said, "*ba mu son dogonilimi*," a Hausa language dictum to the effect that "we do not want studies that take time." It cannot, however, be said with certainty whether the "we" in the sentence was a royal "we" or the assumption, by Tandja, that as head of the state, he was entitled to speak for all Nigeriens. In any case, it was well understood that by "*dogonilimi*", he meant specifically studies in the social sciences and humanities, which were less "useful" than the hard sciences and technology, and which became less useful the longer they lasted. And although the sentence has taken on a proverbial status of sorts, as a jibe against Tandja and his naïve anti-intellectualism, the predisposition it signals is clearly prevalent in Niger's officialdom, even today, for reasons that appear only superficially more sophisticated.

In this paper, I provide an analysis of the reform process – or rather, processes – of Niger's social science research environment from the early 2000s to date, attempting in particular to understand what makes it successful, despite the misgivings of the state – the abovementioned Tandja's "we" probably referred to the state – and also, why, that success is limited and incomplete. By looking at both success and failures, I intend to uncover the underlying parameters that may reveal a roadmap to a

more cohesive reform process in Niger and in other countries with similar issues.

In this regard, the general form of the question that this paper wishes to address is: what accounts for change in a research environment? More specifically, what accounts for successful national reform among organizations dedicated to research in the social sciences? These questions, difficult as they are, become even more complicated when we ask them in the context of low-income countries with a structurally fragile research environment, such as Niger. To issues that are general to research environments in all contexts – funding, training, capacities – we must add the specific problem of the nature and quality of demand (of "wanting") in places where many of the processes that determine international grade research production are either absent or inchoate. The hypothesis is that the relationships between demand and supply are central to the success of reform in so far as they shape the amount and direction of funding, the orientation of training and the expansion and quality of capacities. This may, of course, be true of research environments the world over but gains significant salience when, for diverse reasons, demand is narrow and/or of low quality. In effect, the quality of research is generally assessed in relation to internal criteria, or to the strengths and weaknesses of research systems in which it is produced. However, if we accept that demand is key to the production of research, then we must also assess the nature and quality of this demand and the effects of these factors on research.

In this paper, then, I look at the case of Niger, a low-income country with fledgling social science research systems that are currently undergoing a dynamic process of reform and growth. The paper situates "normal" issues of research environments (funding, training,

capacities) within the specific supply and demand relationship that has developed in the country's recent history and aims at offering a more general reflection on reform under such conditions. I start with a discussion on the dynamics of change in social science research environments before moving to a contextualization of the Nigerien case. This will rely, to a large extent, on historical analysis and reference to changing political economic parameters in the era of reform. I will then focus on the central role of the demand factor in the Nigerien reform efforts, arguing that the neglect of this factor in the various reform processes is the key explanation for their current limitations, which are quite severe in some areas. I end with a series of conclusions relating the Niger case with the broader issue of research systems' reform in low-income countries.

It should be noted that this paper is based on a year-long study of Niger's social science research environment conducted through 2015. The research included interviews and survey of a variety of research producers and demand stakeholders in the country.

## Abstract

This paper examines the conditions of ameliorative change in the social science research environment of low income countries, using the case of Niger. Positing that a dialectic relationship between supply and demand of social knowledge is key to the sustainable development of such research environments, it provides an analysis of the success and limitations of reforms undertaken in the case countries to improve social science research systems. The study finds that the reform processes are constrained by the priorities of different groups of reformers and by the generally low quality of demand. But it also uncovers a number of positive dynamics in those processes, including in the country's commitment to durable changes instigated at the sub-regional level by a regional integration organization, the West African Economic and Monetary Union. Finally, the paper offers policy frames of recommendation on the basis of an engagement with the knowledge utilization literature.

**Keywords** Social science research • Reform, Supply and demand • Niger • Knowledge utilization

# **Dynamics of Change in Social Science Research Systems**

Although the dynamics of change in scholarly research systems have some universal characteristics, one must allow for a great deal of difference between "advanced" and "less advanced" countries. In the heyday of modernization theory,<sup>1</sup> Marion Levy remarked that "the requisites of modernization are not necessarily the same as the prerequisites for modernization," meaning that "the things that have to be done to keep a modernized society modernized are not necessarily the same as the things that have to be done to get it there."<sup>2</sup> Similarly, developed research systems – such as those that exist in advanced countries – broadly present different issues from developing ones, especially when it comes to the question of change. Everywhere, research systems, understood as the set of organizations that manage the production of research – including administrative structures, programs run by institutes or educational institutions, training centers and agenda, dissemination and publication venues and tools – need to maintain and/or grow their capacities through funding and training. The main difference between developed and developing research systems is that,

with the former, all or most constitutive elements of a highly productive, international grade research environment are active and effective, while with the latter, some elements are more active and others are either inchoate or nonexistent. As such, while all research systems need to continuously solve problems related to funding and training, the actual parameters of the problems vary in accordance with the level of development of the various research systems that make up a research environment. Change in a developing research environment often involves the creation or addition of new elements to the research system, meaning that growth and maintenance may well have equal priority – in some cases, growth can become more important than maintenance – whereas in developed research environments, maintenance appears to be generally more important, given that most constitutive elements of the research system already exist. Point to note here is that what is meant by growth in this case is the putting together of the building blocks of a research system, and not quantitative growth.

To keep research systems up to date (maintenance), they must change (adjust, mutate), since the maintenance of high levels of quality in a changing environment means that reforms of adaptation need to be taken up, sometimes quite comprehensively. However, such reforms are obviously different in nature and – arguably – in costs from reforms needed to grow research systems.

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1. Although it is generally assumed that modernization theory has now been completely discarded as we have grown past its illusions, in fact not only are most of its underlying themes and conclusions still with us under different names and concepts, but many of its authors were much more perspicacious than we commonly take them to be.

2 M. J. Levy Jr., *Modernization: Latecomers and Survivors*, New York, London: Basic Books, 1972: 25-26. Of course, this is the language in the heyday of the modernization theory: here, we need only point to the fact that some countries are more advanced in the development of their research systems than others.

It is clear, too, that in each case, the complexity of the issues, especially as they relate to questions of growth and/or maintenance, warrants special examination of circumstances and history. As Marion Levy reminds us, "no presently achieved progress in the social sciences (...) is a substitute for historical literacy about the peoples concerned." (Here, the term "peoples" can be read as "research systems"). However, it is

not possible to undertake a full examination of circumstances in an article-length paper such as this one; an economic way of reaching conclusions has to be found. The approach chosen here has consisted in interrogating the relationships between research production (supply) and demand on the basis of this proposition: that research is not produced in a vacuum, but in response to demand from a variety of stakeholders. In that case, demand is one measurable variable that is external to research systems and yet it shapes the development of these very systems. The broader, more varied and more possessed of resources the demand, the more dynamic and diverse the research environment, and in turn, a dynamic and diverse research environment will have a transformative impact on demand. These two interactive movements then impel a dialectic relationship that ensures a sustainable development of the research environment.

This theory is applied to the case of Niger in order to analyze the reform process in its social science research environment and to understand to what extent it is leading – or not – to conditions of sustainable development. Before getting into the gist of the matter, however, it is useful to give a sense of the Nigerien context as it has evolved to its present circumstances.

## Resistible Rise of Social Science Research in Niger

Nigerien societies first became an object of research in the early 20th Century, under the auspices of a research committee for the French colonies of West Africa, established in December 1915. In the period 1915-36, the committee issued a journal in which numerous articles on Niger were published, with the purpose of buttressing colonial governance with a scientific knowledge of dominated societies. After 1936, a new spirit – more liberal and more inclined towards the left – led to the creation of a more scholarly research institute: the *Institut Français d'Afrique Noire* (IFAN), which opened an antenna in Niamey in 1944. That was the seed from which social science research started to develop in the country. In the early 1950s, Niger's branch of IFAN came under the energetic leadership of Boubou Hama, a politician and self-taught scholar of history and the humanities who had a vision of the human sciences as a way for Nigeriens and Africans to emancipate themselves from the intellectual supremacy of Europe. This vision led him to endeavors to make Niamey "one of the beacons of social science research in Niger, Africa and – if he had not attempted it he must have dreamt of it – the world."<sup>3</sup> Hama's ambitions had a lot to do with his strong, early orientation toward the scientific study of history, language and culture as is testified by the two institutes that came up under his guidance: the *Institut de Recherches en Sciences Humaines* (IRSH), now merged into the University of Niamey, and the African

3. Jérôme Bernussou, author of *Histoire et mémoire au Niger, de l'indépendance à nos jours* (2009) in a blog interview with Libération, 26 September 2014, currently at <http://libearfrica4.blogs.liberation.fr/2014/09/26/le-mangeur-decratie-du-niger/>

Union-sponsored *Centre d'Etudes Historiques et Linguistiques de la Tradition Orale* (CEHLTO).<sup>4</sup> Economic and societal issues were not a direct object of research and study until the end of the 1970s.

While the nationalist motivations for the development of institutions tasked with producing knowledge in history, language and culture were clear enough, the later establishment of programs of study in sociology and economics seems to have originated merely from the idea that a modern university ought to have such programs. At that juncture, the state was the main employer of university graduates and in fact it managed a planned system of recruitment called "programmation" whereby students were assigned the ministry or public service in which they were expected to pursue a career. In this context, research was a kind of work done for the state, with a base in administrative departments and funding earmarked for specific state programs and projects. Also, in that era – from independence to the mid-1980s – bilateral cooperation was central to the aid regime, which contributed to strengthen the hand of the state in the allocation of funding to support research on issues important to the government and its foreign partners. Given the technocratic conceptions of national development that then prevailed, economics was considered the social science of prime interest. At any rate, the state and university research systems were integrated into a closed circuit where demand directly bred research and the latter had little to no autonomy. However, the state also continuously funded a prestigious research monograph series published by IRSN, *Etudes nigériennes*, which played a central role in

defining social research vocations in the country at the time.<sup>4</sup>

But by the end of the 1980s the state had become mired in a long-term fiscal crisis triggered by asphyxiating debt, and it was compelled to engage in drastic retrenchment by structural adjustment programs. The ensuing austerity cuts put paid to the "programmation" system in 1989, meaning that, literally overnight, the demand for social science knowledge practically vanished. Overall funding for the university was slashed as education budgets were refocused on primary schooling at the behest of the World Bank. The concurrent collapse of funding for research and careers, evaporation of demand and removal of resources for training apparently meant that the fledgling social science research system of Niger was nipped in the bud. However, this was not so. The story in the 1990s was that of a profound crisis followed by a gradual recovery toward the end of the decade. For most social science scholars working at the university, the crisis took the rather burning form of loss of income, which weakened their link to their home institution. A telling symptom of the crisis was the very sporadic publication of *Etudes nigériennes* in that period; issue 55 came out in 1989, issue 56 in 1996 and issue 57 in 1999, as opposed to an almost annual publication in the period running from its foundation to the mid-1980s. Research had plummeted.

The changed context nonetheless brought with it some opportunities. The retreat of the state also implied a decline of bilateral aid and a corresponding rise of multilateral aid, while the political opening that came with democratization (1991) favored international networking. The net impact on the research system was twofold: on the one hand the state lost its research capabilities and its connection to the university as main knowledge demand stakeholder;

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4. IRSN was first created as the Centre National de la Recherche en Sciences Humaines in 1964 and CEHLTO as the Centre Régional de Documentation sur la Tradition Orale in 1968.

on the other hand, research by university scholars declined to consultancy level or, at best, a form of subcontracting work for northern academic institutions. This latter development had positive implications: cooperation with northern universities and research institutions often came with research programs that lasted several years, included exchange programs that funded the studies of many young Nigerien scholars, and sometimes left behind viable research infrastructures, such as the Géoconseil institute in the geography department of the University of Niamey.

During this period, the main demand stakeholders that emerged in lieu of the state were international organizations and rich countries' cooperation agencies. Such organizations were not interested in the development of local research systems; they operated in an international market of research production where Nigerien scholars were less competitive. The latter – who were also indispensable for access in certain issue areas and were generally cheaper – took rank as second best option after international experts, nurtured in developed research environments. Nigerien social science researchers working in the late 1990s engaged almost exclusively in consultancy work. At any rate, the fundamental task of providing fresh understanding of society and novel theories grounded in Nigerien experiences – the very spur behind the birth of this research environment in the 1960s – receded into oblivion.

This complex interlocking of crisis and latent opportunities provided the framework in which, in the early 2000s, efforts from different directions triggered a reform process.

## Threads of Reform

The term "reform" is not generally used in Niger to characterize the changes that started to take place in the 2000s and that are still happening today. I use it, however, to mark the quest for improvement and solutions to a situation of crisis and decline that is the hallmark of the initiatives and measures that multiplied in the period. Moreover, these changes transpired in a period when the relationships between the university and the state were being restored on new bases. After the troubled 1990s – when intense political instability and unrelenting austerity paralyzed the state – the 2000s saw the return of governmental stability and a modicum of financial autonomy. While donors – the IMF-World Bank combine in particular – still dictated the direction of policy and supported funding for "basic education" in the framework of poverty reduction efforts, the revenue boom from mining (oil and uranium) after 2006 especially enabled the government to expand support for education to the university and other higher education institutions. Other large-scale policies – in particular decentralization, which got on track in the period 1998-2000 – multiplied demand for social science knowledge from both aid organizations and newly installed local authorities, that is, notably, the development which inspired the creation of the social science institute *Laboratoire d'études et de recherches sur les dynamiques sociales et le développement local* (LASDEL).

In this context, four threads of reform may be indicated: the creation of LASDEL in 2001, Niger's return to the fold of the *Conseil Africain et Malgache pour l'Enseignement Supérieur* (CAMES) in 2003, its adoption of the *Licence-Master-Doctorat* (LMD) system in 2009, and finally the creation of regional universities starting in 2010. I provide a summary description and analysis of each

of these threads of reform. It bears noting that the CAMES and LMD processes came about as a consequence of West African regionalism, especially as organized by the *Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine* (UEMOA). Such processes are underway in all UEMOA countries in the framework of a community policy of "harmonization" in higher education, and the same general issues as encountered in the Niger case also exist in the eight member countries. Therefore, at the very least, conclusions from the Niger case may be generalized, to a large extent, to those other countries.<sup>5</sup>

A restored state-university relationship: the orientation taken in the late 1980s to focus on primary education has not changed in public policy and, as the state was recovering from the fiscal crisis in the late 1990s, that orientation was reaffirmed in legislation (*Loi d'orientation du système éducatif national*, LOSEN, 1998) and policy (*Programme Décennal de Développement de l'Education*, PDDE, 2003, exclusively dedicated to primary education). Through the 2000s, Niger has regularly allocated between 25 to 30 percent of the national budget to education, over 60 percent of that going to primary education. As a result, Niger's higher education sector remains rather small, even by the standard of low-income countries. In 2013, the country had 198 students per 100,000 inhabitants, when the regional (West African) average was 600 students per 100,000 inhabitants. The sector is not

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5. UEMOA has eight member states (Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea Bissau, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo) and a total population of over 80 million. Created in 1994, its member states share a single currency, a common market, and have established full freedom of movement of citizens of member states across the 3.5 m. sq. km of the community's territory. "Harmonization" in higher education systems means that, for students and teachers in UEMOA states, the higher education market is regional, not simply national. This also facilitates cooperation – including in terms of staff exchange programs and research between the universities.

favorable to the development of research, in particular in the social sciences; 33 percent of the sector is run by private institutions, where typically training is orientated toward the development of professional rather than research proficiencies, and things are not much better in the public segment of the sector. State policy statements usually not only regret quite openly that there are more students in the social sciences and the humanities than in the more "useful" hard sciences, but also stress efforts to render the social sciences more "useful" by making them more vocational.<sup>6</sup> Social science research is clearly not a priority for the state, and while university scholars approach the issue from a different perspective, the dependence of the universities on state funding means that they have to accommodate such policy orientations. A Belgian study of 2010 found that state funding made up, in total, 95 percent of the financial resources of the University of Niamey – then still the country's sole university. The balance came essentially from the university's own income and, secondarily, from outside funding.<sup>7</sup> According to the rector's office, the prevailing trend is that about one-fourth of the funding goes to research in the hard sciences, even though a new trend now implies more funding for the social sciences. Increasingly, funding for fundamental research in the hard sciences is giving way to support for "research/development" which lays emphasis on collaboration between natural and social scientists. This evolution is again a response to the state's preoccupation with the practicalities of "national development," seen

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6. See the strategy document for the new state agenda for education in Niger, the *Programme Sectoriel de l'Education et de la Formation* (PSEF) 2014-2024, p. 10. This document is the source for the figures mentioned above. The PSEF is the successor to the PDDE (2003-2013).

7. "Rapport de mission d'identification" by Pierre Grega, Bureau d'étude DRIS, 13 May 2011 (unpublished, private communication). This funding structure has not changed at the time of research.

as more urgent than theoretical knowledge. While a national fund for research and technological innovation has been formally created in 2014, it is still not in operation and the first flagship research conference<sup>8</sup> which was scheduled in January 2015 to signal the state's commitment to support "research and innovation" eventually never took place, officially for lack of funding.

This discussion shows that the new frame offered to scholarly activities by the state is at best ambivalent on the question of social science research, even though it represents an improvement on the situation in the 1990s.

**The creation of LASDEL:** this social science laboratory was created in explicit response to the 1990s' crisis and aims at tackling both the rise of consultancy – seen as a problem by LASDEL's founders – and the "passivity" of the state. It emerged as an association of concerned social scientists who, in a sense, rekindled the ambitions of the 1960s of making Niamey a place where international grade social science research is produced. Endorsed by the University of Niamey, LASDEL is, however, not funded by the state. It built a financial model that relies on the convergence between the interests of the main demand stakeholders in the contemporary era (bilateral and multilateral cooperation organizations) and the research foci of its members. The idea was to propose research skills and products strong enough to allow LASDEL to negotiate funding away from consultancy and the market-based client/service provider relationship that it implies. LASDEL was able to achieve this, thanks to large-scale initial support from the French *Institut de la Recherche pour le Développement*

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8. Moreover, those "journées scientifiques nationales" were planned to be a celebration of the hard and practical sciences, and were entitled "scientific research and technological innovation in the service of national development."

(a co-founder of LASDEL), the Canadian International Development Research Center, the *Agence Française de Développement*, and the *Direction du Développement et de la Coopération* (Switzerland). LASDEL was also able to build a strong and expanding network of cooperation with northern universities (mainly European) while also establishing linkages with research centers across the African continent. The strategy used by LASDEL can be interpreted as a maximization of the opportunities that came with the crisis of the 1990s: multilateral funding and networking. Through such maximization, LASDEL demonstrated that it was possible to continue to engage in serious social science research even within the very restrictive parameters that then prevailed in Niger. I will return to some of the limitations of this strategy when discussing demand factors in the section on demand.

**Return to the CAMES:** the African and Malagasy Higher Education Council is an organization of 19 member states that functions as a supranational organ of certification and accreditation of degrees for its member countries – all of them French-speaking save for Guinea Bissau and Equatorial Guinea. Although it was created in Niamey in 1968, Niger left the CAMES during the 1990s, an outcome of its crisis in that decade, which further debilitated research capacities at the University of Niamey. As an international peer review system regulating the career of scholars, the CAMES stimulates research productivity on the basis of the "publish or perish" (or at least "stagnate") principle. When Niger returned to its fold in 2003, this established a new set of exigencies that amounted to a CAMES-induced reform of the country's higher education sector. CAMES regulates the development of university departments in the sense that it determines the academic ranks needed in a department for it to offer higher degrees

(Masters and Doctorate) and, in particular, to offer research degrees. As a result, for any department to train researchers, its faculty must count professors of certain ranks, and to reach those ranks, scholars must either publish a certain number of peer-reviewed research articles, or pass the *agrégation* examination. To develop its departments, the University of Niamey, therefore, revised its funding structure to include subsidies for research and research-related activities. Because of the specificity of the goal, all the measures taken seek to incentivize researchers, not necessarily to develop the research environment. A good example of such measures is the automatic payment of a "reward" of 100,000 cfa francs (about 170\$ at current rates of conversion or one-sixth of the starting salary of a university scholar) for the publication of an article in a scientific journal. The real incentive, however, is for university scholars to focus on career-advancement, not on research production as such. This was apparent in all interview responses from the scholars themselves and its implications will be analyzed in relation to the issue of demand.

**The LMD process:** the Licence-Master-Doctorat process is a side-shoot of Niger's return to the CAMES. In the early 2000s, CAMES had jumped on the LMD bandwagon started by the countries of continental Europe (Bologna Declaration, 1999). The African universities decided to organize their processes on regional bases, and in October 2005, those in West Africa gathered in the *Réseau pour l'Excellence de l'Enseignement Supérieur en Afrique de l'Ouest* (REESAO), a network currently of 15 universities and institutes. The LMD process has had far-reaching consequences, but here I will examine only its impact on the social science research environment. Prior to the LMD reform, Niger's higher education system had started training in research only after the maîtrise

degree (a rough equivalent of the Bachelor degree of the American higher education system). Pathways of students bifurcated into two post-maîtrise degrees, the *Diplôme d'études supérieures spécialisées (DESS)* and the *Diplôme d'études approfondies (DEA)*. The former was a professionalizing degree that sought to equip students with skills for success in the labor market, while the DEA was a gateway to the doctorate and a career as a teacher and researcher. The LMD reform purported to simplify the matter by issuing a single Master's degree on the lines of the American practice. However, pressures from both the labor market (mediated by private universities and institutes) and the state led to – in Niger as in other REESAO countries – a reinstatement of the old bifurcation, under the designations of *Master Professionnel* (professional MA) and *Master Recherche* (research MA). Moreover, the creation of a research MA program requires the establishment of an *Ecole doctorale* (analogous to the American graduate school) to run research MA and doctorate programs within a given faculty. In Niger, one doctoral school was created for all social sciences and the humanities – even though these are taught in different faculties – and priority was given to the setup of professional MAs, in particular in economics, 12 GDN Working Paper No. 90 GDN Working Paper No. 90 13 where there were no research MAs programs at the time of research.

**Regional universities:** Since 2010, six regional universities have been created in Niger, the idea being that each of the seven regions of the country will eventually have its own public university. At this point, the social sciences are taught in three universities: sociology and geography in Zinder, rural economy in Maradi, and economics in Tahoua. This automatically increases research capacities in the university research system in at least two senses: first, the geographic

decentralization stimulates better and more local research, and second, each university is developing its own research and dissemination infrastructure, and the universities of Zinder and Maradi have already founded peer-reviewed periodicals.

These various threads of reform do not constitute a coherent reform agenda aimed at transforming the research environment for the social sciences in Niger. The main actors – the state, the concerned scholars, university reformers – are disparate in their goals, methods and resources. But it is evident – in particular with the creation of new programs in the framework of the LMD process and the establishment of new universities – that reform in this case means more *growing* the system rather than adapting to better *maintain* what has already been built. Before exploring the implications of this choice in the section on demand, I summarize some of the conclusions that may be drawn from these experiences with change and reform.

A resurgent state, flush with higher revenue from the mining sector and sounder macroeconomic parameters, is reinvesting in higher education in accordance with the pieties of the age: national development is still the key task of the state – and hence it must support the useful (hard) sciences – but the public and private labor markets need trained competencies, and hence professional degrees must take precedence over degrees in research.

The concerned scholars at the LASDEL believe in the usefulness of fundamental and empirical research in and on Niger and maintain linkages with the University of Niamey that would allow them to reach some of their key objectives in this regard. The institute has thus recently established a research master on health with the sociology department, and recruits and finances students through stringent admission criteria.

But its current financial model and the nature of demand in Niger means that its resources are easily stretched thin.

Both the CAMES and LMD-based reforms have made of research a key factor in the careers of university scholars but their impact in this regard is limited by the fact that career advancement remains the single most important spur to research. In the social sciences, the possibility of securing such advancement through the *agrégation examination* – a shortcut to higher ranks – and the continuing lure of consultancy income and – a new factor – paid appointments outside the university often neuter that spur. In the regional universities, staffed mostly with younger scholars cut off from these opportunities by distance and circumstances, another shortcoming of the reforms – in so far as research is concerned – takes greater salience: underfunding for infrastructures (libraries and access to data and new research in particular) and lack of the coordination required for the building of viable research programs – which is also connected to dearth of funding.

I argue that central to the limitations of these threads of reform, and a key reason as to why they have so far not cohered into an effective, transformative process despite some positive changes, is the issue of demand. In the sections that follow, I first discuss this issue in general terms, resorting to the literature on factors of knowledge utilization, before examining the ways in which it plays out in the current Nigerien situation.

# Demand Side and Factors of Knowledge Utilization

As the Tandja's dictum evoked at the beginning of this paper shows, the central question that any set of reforms aimed at improving the quality and quantity of research output has to respond to in a low-income country context, is that of the utility of the research. Unlike in high-income countries, where the serendipity and enlightenment arguments of social science research utility are generally accepted by demand sectors, states in low-income countries tend to have aggressively utilitarian orientations in the way they arbitrate for resource allocations. Moreover, given the role of the state as resource aggregator and the main trendsetter in such contexts, its orientations directly affect the expectations of other stakeholders. In Niger, and perhaps in many similar contexts, the nature of demand reveals that perceptions vis-à-vis social science research are that it is not useful. There is much evidence of this, not only in state policy statements and in the priority given to the development of professional programs of studies at the expense of research programs, but even at the university where discussions about improving the research environment often refer to the hard sciences only.<sup>9</sup> And we have seen that direct demand stakeholders have generally no use for the social science knowledge produced in the country.

In the literature, the issue of the social utility of social science knowledge has been studied as that of the *utilization* of social science knowledge. Utilization is more measurable

than utility and also tells us whether or not users (demand) find social science to be useful. Specifically, the literature on knowledge utilization has focused on the factors that would lead potential demand to turn into actual use. Four models have been constructed since the late 1970s to uncover such factors and explain how they operate. Three are linear and sequential: a science push model, a demand pull model and a dissemination model; a fourth model emphasizes interaction.

The science push model holds that advances in research results determine knowledge utilization. The initial factors of research utilization are, therefore, the findings and ideas of researchers that are transferred to consumers and are used on the basis of their merit. In view of this, many aspects of research results will prove compelling enough to shape and influence utilization in the policy world. These can be content attributes such as efficiency, reliability, complexity, radicalness, etc., or they can derive from the type of research (quantitative or qualitative) or the field of study. Also, some studies of "science push" found no relation between the technical qualities of a study and the utilization of its results, meaning that utilization does not depend on some pre-specified interest elements of knowledge consumers.<sup>10</sup>

Critics of this model pointed out that it is not clear how knowledge can be transferred when no one takes responsibility for the transfer. Others also stressed that "raw research information" is usable as policy only after a process of transformation for the consumer, which may or may not happen. Such criticisms led to the emergence of the

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9. See the report of the national convention ("états généraux") of higher education, October 2013, p. 10.

10. See W. N. Dunn, "Measuring knowledge use," in *Knowledge: Creation, Diffusion*, 5, 1 (1983): 120-133; M. Huberman, "Steps toward and integrated model of knowledge utilization," in *Knowledge*, 8 (1987): 586-611.

"demand pull" model,<sup>11</sup> where knowledge utilization is explained by the needs of users rather than by the initiatives of researchers. The latter are thought to respond to frameworks of inquiries set up by demand stakeholders. Additionally, this model is able to explain the underutilization of research by demonstrating that in cases where research results conflict with the organizational and political interests of demand stakeholders, such results are less likely to be used. The focus in the demand pull model is, therefore, on the instrumental use of knowledge, something which overlooks the fact that different types of knowledge lead to different uses, and that interaction between producers and users may create a social milieu where the egotistical orientation of potential users takes the backseat and greater knowledge utilization occurs.

In this regard, the dissemination model stresses that knowledge utilization depends on diffusion mechanisms. This is a variant of the "science push" model, where the "push" factor is systematized and rendered effective by resorting to specific dissemination practices that tend to establish a single-flow logic of communication between research producers and consumers. As such, the model does not respond to the criticism that the reception of knowledge by a potential user does not mean it will actually be used. In fact, for many scholars,<sup>12</sup> the lack of

interaction between researchers and their potential audiences is the main factor in the underutilization of knowledge.

The interaction model is an integration of the explanatory factors identified in the other models. Researchers do have initiatives, which they would relate to the expressed needs of audiences, who, in that sense, also display a level of initiative. Knowledge utilization would be maximized through an interactive form of communication, instead of the single-flow logic of the dissemination model. Indeed, proponents of this model emphasize that intense and sustained interaction between researchers and users enhances the likelihood of research use, in particular because this creates modes of communication that bridge the differences of culture that exist between researchers and potential users.

While this literature emphasizes the fact that there are several types of research, it does not draw conclusions from the fact that demand is also diverse. An analysis of the nature of demand may help us to better understand the nature of factors of knowledge utilization. In this light, I believe we should recognize that there are two broad types of demand for knowledge – direct and indirect demand – which in turn can be divided into several sub-categories.

Direct demand comes from specific stakeholders, while indirect demand comes from either the general public, or a smaller section of the public – chiefly, the academic community and other readers of academic journals, studies, etc. Direct demand implies an application for research production generally coupled with funding, with the initiative coming, therefore, from the demand side. Indirect demand, on the other hand, is a response of researchers to issues and concerns which they feel are important to the public. They, therefore, take

11. R. K. Yin and G.B. Moore, "Lessons on the utilization of research from nine case experiences in the natural hazard field," in *Knowledge in Society: the International Journal of Knowledge Transfer*, 1, 3 (1988): 25-44; R. F. Rich, "Measuring knowledge utilization process and outcomes," in *Knowledge and policy: the International Journal of Knowledge Transfer and Utilization*, 10, 3 (1997): 3-10.

12. See J. Lomas, "Finding audiences, changing beliefs: the structure of research use in Canadian health policy," in *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 15, 3 (1990): 525-541, and P. Leung, "Translation of knowledge into practice," in Walcott and Associates, NIDRR, National CRP Final Report. Walcott and Associates, Washington DC, 1992.

the initiative to research such issues. Indirect demand implies indirect funding through salary, public research funds, and career advancement, while direct demand comes with direct funding through a contract. Direct demand stakeholders may be entities from the public or private sector, both national and international, while indirect demand may find expression through national research councils or foundations which organize open competition for research funds to allocate resources through a broad-based review system, which does not follow a specific research agenda.

In the literature, “demand” is consistently intended to mean what is defined here as “direct demand,” hence some of the confusion in the discussion of the matter. For instance, the “science push” model makes more sense in a context where “indirect demand” is emphasized, but the criticism from proponents of the “demand pull” model assumes that all demand is necessarily direct. Moreover, direct demand itself can have variable effects depending on whether it is public or private, international, national or local demand. Hence to understand the complexities of the relationship between supply and demand in a research environment, we need to identify all possible relations between the various research types and a variety of demand types. In sum, we need a model that integrates more than the factors of knowledge utilization predicated on a relation between production and a simple form of direct demand. In exploring the case of Niger, that much will become evident.

## Demand Side in Niger

While in Niger the most developed research system in the social sciences is clearly that of the universities, the latter rely mostly on a specific form of indirect demand for research production. All interviewed scholars frankly admitted that their top motivation for writing research papers is publication in an academic journal for the purpose of career advancement. This means that, as in consultancy, the basic motivation is material, since higher rank comes with higher salary and greater access to patronage resources. Another implication is that research interests tend to be secondary to publication, meaning that researchers tend to be less interested in building a consistent scholarly profile and a following among students than in their personal milestones. In an interview, one critical observer of the Nigerien academic scene in the social sciences<sup>13</sup> stressed that this “individualistic” behavior explains why Nigerien scholars do not build “schools,” that is, the kind of informal intellectual movements which serve as nurseries for new researchers, beacons of ideas and targets of emulation for other leading researchers. This sub-category of indirect demand is demonstrably of low quality (limited pull effect) when it comes to developing a research environment.

However, before drawing definite conclusions, one must also remember that university scholars operate in a world of constraints. For instance, even as building a consistent research agenda is time-consuming, most scholars have to cope with stringent teaching responsibilities with little hope of relief from new recruitments. Even though Niger’s ratio of students to population is much below regional average,

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13. The socio-anthropologist Jean-Pierre Oliver de Sardan, one of the founders of LASDEL.

its ratio of teachers to students is also below standards. According to the vice-rector in charge of research at the University of Niamey, international standards are of 25 students per teacher; at the University of Niamey, the current ratio is 152 students per teacher. The university administration has requested a hundred new appointments to "fix the issue" ("juguler le problème"), but higher education budgets currently prioritize the creation and development of regional universities (growth over maintenance).<sup>14</sup> In this context, hours devoted to teaching, grading and supervising overwhelm university professors, especially since in some departments (most of all economics) they also teach in private institutions where the pay is handsome. Given this context, the fact that the pull effect of the indirect academic-public demand exists at all can be justifiably seen as a lifeline for social science research production in Niger.

Indirect demand is unorganized, despite the financial incentives of the universities' research funds, including subsidies for research travels or fieldwork, conference trips and even – as mentioned earlier – a substantial reward tip for article publication. Access to such funds is considered a right and is, therefore, noncompetitive. In review processes, the rector's office must only establish a system of fairness where applicants benefit in turn up to the exhaustion of funds earmarked for a given period. The noncompetitive nature of these grants unsurprisingly leads to low research output, given that there is no retribution that may come in the appraisal of future applications. The practice is, therefore,

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14. There are about 350 university professors in Niger, all working in Niamey before the foundation of the new universities. After 2010, they had to be redeployed across the land while the freeze on new recruitments continues. Apparently, the Nigerien government knows growth is costly, wants growth nevertheless, but does not quite want to pay for it.

reflective of the option for rapid growth and does not indicate the existence of a form of organized indirect demand – which relies on maintaining research – supporting institutions. In this view, since 2014, Niger is considering establishing a national council for science and technology, which may serve as a coordination agency for the competitive allocation of research funds and thus constitute an organized form of indirect demand. However, it should be noted that the blueprint for this organization is Morocco's *Conseil National pour la Recherche Scientifique et Technique* (CNRST) which coordinates research programs in information technology, biotechnology, renewable energy, food industry, and industrialization. At first sight, there appears to be no room for the social sciences here.

There is much talk, at the university, about attracting direct demand from the public and private sectors. The hard sciences departments and institutes already do attract direct demand and, as mentioned, in some contexts they work with social science scholars in multi-disciplinary programs. But most direct demand for social science knowledge is currently geared toward private research producers: consultants (oftentimes university scholars working in a private capacity), consulting firms ("bureau d'études") and independent institutes such as LASDEL. The main direct demand stakeholders are bilateral and multilateral aid organizations working in Niger, followed by the state and local government. It is not clear, on the other hand, whether businesses (banks and enterprises) are consumers of social science knowledge, due to lack of response to the study survey. The survey uncovered that bilateral and multilateral organizations rely almost exclusively on three sources of knowledge on Nigerien society:

international consultancies, state databases and national consultancies – in that order. This type of direct demand has been largely detrimental to the development of social science research in the country. Indeed, the majority of those responding to this demand are university scholars who not only dedicate valuable time to producing derivative research and technical reports, but who also acquire professional habits and networks that tend to drive them away from their academic vocation. Moreover, this type of direct demand does not relate to the research environment: products are not published, conferences are not organized around them, careers are not built, and younger researchers are not trained in what is, after all, only a commercial transaction. In sum, this relationship illustrates the “demand pull” model of the literature in all its instrumental glory.

As we have seen, LASDEL was founded with the ambition to break this bind by reversing to an extent the logic of direct demand. With direct demand, the initial application – for knowledge – comes from the demand side. The calls for application for funds that the demand stakeholder presents to the community of researchers and consultants are the procedure through which the demand stakeholder publicizes his own application for knowledge. LASDEL’s strategy has consisted in negotiating the terms of demand stakeholders’ application for knowledge. A demand stakeholder may normally apply for a study addressing specific points of interest, in a context where the conceptual/analytical work developing the goals of the research had already been done, oftentimes by specialists working for or at the headquarters of the organization of the demand stakeholder. LASDEL prefers to either formulate the conceptual/analytical substance of the research, or at the very least discuss it with the demand stakeholder.

Through this approach, a convergence can be found between the points of interest of the demand stakeholder and the research interests of specific LASDEL scholars, leading to outcomes where, ideally, the demand stakeholder obtains the products he had applied for, and the LASDEL scholar secures the funding needed to advance their own project.

This process, through which a consultancy assignment becomes a research project has now been routinized by LASDEL and was made possible by the capacities of the institute in terms of both its organization and its material resources. In this way, LASDEL fits, to a large extent, the “interaction model” of the literature, which is considered potentially the most successful in terms of knowledge utilization. The LASDEL approach, however, has so far not been replicated elsewhere in the country, in part because the level of initial support that the institute benefited from over several years is hard to come by, but also owing to the fact that its financial model is a tough nut to crack in the Nigerien context. Indeed, interviews with LASDEL’s leadership indicate that, that financial model – which relies on taking cuts from research budgets and, therefore, depends extensively on research contracts – imposes frustrating limitations to the development plans of the institute. A less volatile demand will strengthen the financial model and ideally might come from a combination of support from the state – including in the form of direct public demand – and stable institutional funding from international partners.

In sum, both indirect and direct demands for research in the social sciences are limited to the types of demand that are least conducive to the development of the research system. There is an awareness of the issue as some of the buzzwords at the

universities testify<sup>15</sup> but there are elements in the specific context of Niger that go a long way toward explaining why the supply and demand relationship has taken this particular form in the country. One of these elements is related to the fact that, in the Niger higher education system, the growth of the system takes precedence over its maintenance, and public funding prioritizes the job market over the research environment. For factors of utilization to become fully active, most elements of a research system must also be active. But in a context where funding trade-offs privilege other sectors of higher education and prioritize agenda for which the development of research systems is indifferent, these elements will tend to remain inactive. In Niger, investment in the growth of higher education is something that needs justification, given the limited resources of the country and the long standing focus of state policy on primary education. The justification that is politically acceptable and also appears to be imbued with common sense in the national conversation today is that higher education must immediately provide usable goods, such as practical knowledge and employable graduates.<sup>16</sup> In this specific case, this conclusion need not be dispiriting, because of contingencies in the case that tend to modify the negative outcome that should logically transpire. Indeed, some aspects of

the reform processes described earlier have led to positive dynamics in the social science research environment of Niger, most of which are closely linked with the growth policy. Thus, for instance, we have seen that to develop professional Masters programs, Niger universities must comply with CAMES criteria about the ranks of teachers qualified to teach in such programs – which means that they need to stimulate research production from their teaching staff. More generally, Niger must comply with the CAMES objective of establishing LMD universities in all its member states, meaning that eventually – and despite misgivings among state policymakers – doctoral schools will have to be funded and developed in all universities.

To be sure, such positive contingencies are largely accidents of history and may not exist in other countries with problems similar to those of Niger. Moreover, even if one can be comforted by the opportunities they present, they do not of themselves successful reform make. Reform will lead to sustainable development of the research environment only if a dialectical relationship – a mutual push and pull – between supply and demand emerges. What could make that happen?

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15. "Valorisation de la recherche" ("promotion of research"), "restaurer la crédibilité de l'université, améliorer sa visibilité" ("restore the university's credibility, improve its visibility"), phrases that emerge from a sense of disconnect between the university's purpose of knowledge production and utilization on the one hand and society on the other hand. See a French Embassy official note on Niger's higher education system ("Fiche Curie" of 3 November 2014), personal communication.

16. These things can change: as we have seen in the history section, for the national conversation in the 1960s, goods sought from social science knowledge were more immaterial, as they related to the project of building a "national (Nigerien, African) culture" rooted in the understanding and sense of perspective provided by scholarship.

# **Conclusion: Which Way to Sustainable Development of a Social Science Research Environment?**

The study of the Niger case allows us to draw a number of lessons in terms of understanding and harnessing reform processes. Acknowledging that such processes often have different agents and agenda, we should tease out points of contradiction and of convergence and then work to reduce the former and enhance the latter, the objective always being the strengthening of the relationships between research producers and (all) research consumers. In this regard, some of the lessons to be drawn from the Niger case may be very schematically presented as follows:

***Understand whether the reform is about growth or maintenance:*** different partnerships are central to reform processes: public/private but also public/public – i.e., the state and public international organizations or bilateral agencies. But the main actor is the state, as resource aggregator, trendsetter and stable source of direct public demand. Although in the case of Niger the state has opted for growth – in partnership with a variety of international public organizations<sup>17</sup> – not all low-income countries choose this type of reform. Arguably, there are less contradictions in

maintenance-centered reforms than in growth-centered ones. The latter are more costly and intensive and therefore require more stringent arbitrations. In such cases, promoters of research systems must take advantage of those aspects of the growth policy that require improvements in the research systems, and advocate for such improvements.

***Advocate the organization of indirect demand:*** indirect demand seems to have no significant impact on the research environment when it is not organized. In the case of Niger, funds that are used to incentivize researchers to produce career-advancing research will be more productively spent if they were to support a public research financing board that rewards good projects – i.e., projects responding to concerns in society – while also promoting young scholars and publicizing research results beyond academic journals/venues. In growth-centered reform processes, the case for the creation of such a board – where it does not exist – can be easily made as part of growing the system and, perhaps, as a trade-off with non-efficient elements of the policy (such as the current incentivization approach in Niger). Such an advocacy may be easier if perceptions of the usefulness of social science research are more positive.

***Invest in “social” training:*** the perception that social science research is not useful is largely based on the fact that researchers seldom endeavor to demonstrate its usefulness – especially in Niger. There are “cultural” reasons for this: social scientists are trained to think that interaction with society is necessarily a form of action in society that risks contaminating their science. Much better to stay inside the ivory tower. In Niger, the universities now lament this as a loss of “connection” and “visibility” that translates into a “loss of credibility,” and

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17. CAMES, REESAO and also the *Union Economique et Monétaire Ouest-Africaine* (UEMOA), which is the main organization through which CAMES and REESAO actors have access to state policymakers.

there is a push for researchers to be better communicators and even – under specified conditions – actors “in the field.” The social aptitudes for this are, however, not spontaneous, and their acquisition should be integrated as part of the training for both students and career scholars. Scholars may also establish more “research and action” bodies and expand dissemination/communication mechanisms to up-to-date media (social networks and other web-based media for instance). A side effect of such investment is the development of interactive rapport with demand stakeholders.

***Establish interactive rapport with several demand sectors:*** interactive relations and communication between researchers and users are the most efficient factors of knowledge utilization. For such relations to be profitable to the research environment, however, research organizations (university, institutes, think tanks) need to establish them with a variety of demand sectors/types, which means that they must increase their own versatility/capacities as research producers.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, on the basis of the Niger case analysis, we can say that the understanding of the context of reform, the organization of indirect reform (where researchers can better exert their “push”), the investment in social training (where researchers can respond better to the “pull” of demand) and finally the establishment of interactive rapport (where push and pull develop a dialectical relationship of mutual enhancement and support) are

all necessary ingredients for a successful reform process. These are not the only factors that need consideration, but they are the main factors that play a role in the establishment of a productive supply and demand relationship, which, ultimately, is the central engine driving improvements in any research environment.

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18. For instance, a criticism of LASDEL, which is the most successful organization in this approach in Niger, is that it offers only one type of methodological approach – qualitative/empirical data collection and reporting – and therefore fails to attract the interest of demand stakeholders that are in need of different research-based information.

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# **Notes**

## **The Global Development Network**

The Global Development Network (GDN) is a public international organization that supports high quality, policy-oriented, social science research in developing and transition countries to promote better lives. It supports researchers with financial resources, global networking, and access to information, training, peer review and mentoring. GDN acts on the premise that better research leads to more informed policies and better, more inclusive development. Through its global platform, GDN connects social science researchers with policymakers and development stakeholders across the world. Founded in 1999, GDN is currently headquartered in New Delhi.

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