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AREVA in Niger

Context

AREVA has been present in Niger for almost 40 years through its subsidiaries COMINAK and SOMAÏR. The group is represented by AREVA Niger, its Niamey-based branch, which handles its exploration programs and the development of new mining projects.

The mining activity is centered in a very isolated, semi-desert area 250 km from Agadez and 1200 km from Niamey, historically populated by Tuareg nomads. Two towns, Arlit and Akokan have sprung up due to this mining activity, and are currently home to around 80,000 people; the 1600 or so employees and their families account for around one quarter of the population. Mining is the only industrial activity in the region. Water can be found at a depth of around 100 m and is currently pumped and distributed by the mining companies. Lastly, the "mining road", an ancient track surfaced by AREVA, links Arlit to Tahoua via Agadez.

Two private hospitals belonging to the mining companies provide free, high-quality healthcare for employees and their families, and for all the populations living in the vicinity (who account for 60 to 70% of its patients).

In Arlit and the surrounding area, Tuaregs, who have kept up their traditional way of life and therefore have little to do with the mining companies, live alongside a predominantly Hausa population from Niamey and the south of the country, drawn to the region to provide labor and managers for the mines. This cohabitation is affecting the sociological change in the region.

The 1996 constitution made decentralization a major issue. Several urban and rural communities with elected executive bodies have since been set up despite the limited resources. Public services are available in Arlit and Akokan (schools, district hospitals, etc.) but resources are very scarce.

Actions for social and economic development

In this context, expectations run high but social and economic development is clearly the top priority. In 2005, after having sounded out numerous local stakeholders, AREVA reviewed and strengthened its policy to support the development of the populations living in the vicinity of its mines (in the town and the surrounding villages) and the burgeoning local democracy. This is no easy matter. The recipients themselves have made it clear that the group must not fall into the trap of simply handing out aid; rather it has to help the local associations and leaders to acquire a true project culture and the desire to obtain results which will allow them to become independent. Most importantly, it has to gradually provide the local authorities and communities with the resources they need to program and implement public infrastructure programs in Arlit, and manage community amenities.

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A Consultation Committee was formed in 2006. It is chaired by the Prefect and brings together community representatives, elected officials, local chiefs and civil society who decide jointly on local development projects. Given the absence of any institutional or financial partners, AREVA provides most of the funding for the projects adopted by the Committee. In 2006, AREVA spent €1.6 million on community development and patronage in the widest sense in Niger.

Furthermore, the Nigerien government has launched a food safety program. One of the most important aspects of the program is the project to develop and enhance the irrigated areas in the Irhazer valley and the Tamesna plain, in the Agadez region.

AREVA has expressed its desire to support this program and in concrete terms, has agreed to provide the amount hoped for by the Nigerien government to finance the project to extend the arable surface area through irrigation, i.e. around 11.4 billion CFA francs (€17 million), which will enable the creation of 5000 hectares. To get the ball rolling as quickly as possible, AREVA has offered to finance the feasibility study and the creation of one or two pilot farms around bore-holes already drilled in the Irhazer valley, with a view to validating the models selected.

Today, the political situation in Niger is tense; rebels in the north of the country are engaged in armed conflict with the government. In this context, AREVA, which refuses to interfere in the affairs of the country, is concentrating solely on its uranium extraction and exploration activities, giving preference to local sub-contractors for its procurement.

But it appears that the living conditions of the nomad peoples have been steadily deteriorating for some time. A number of tribal chiefs and mayors of rural communities are even going so far as to envisage a cultural transformation for the populations under their responsibility. In fact for some, it is no longer taboo to live a sedentary life and with some initial training, vegetable gardening could become a new source of income for the Tuaregs; child education is also becoming a priority. At local community level, the projects submitted to the Consultation Committee appear to be going along these lines (for example the meteoric water management project, etc.). At regional level, the Irhazer project is preparing for this change. As far as education is concerned, AREVA has contributed funding for the construction of primary schools for nomad children in Takriza, Eroug, Arag, and Techilé, and has recently launched a program whereby the schools will be sponsored by the group's industrial sites to ensure their continued upkeep and provide them with the resources they need. AREVA and local NGOs are examining the possibility of creating facilities for nomad children who have moved on to secondary education. In the same vein, and to rise to the economic challenges facing the region due to the renewed interest in uranium, AREVA has signed an agreement with the Ecole des Mines de l'Air in Agadez which trains technicians and supervisors; under the agreement, the group will help to provide equipment and training.

Lastly, despite the aforementioned cultural problems, AREVA has managed to attract a large number of Tuareg employees, far in excess of the national average but still insufficient. The group is perfectly aware that increasing these numbers will be a strong societal challenge. It does not exclude the possibility of setting up accelerated training courses for these populations at some point in the future.

Environmental actions

As regards the environment, AREVA did not wait for NGOs to voice their concerns, which in passing are quite legitimate, before setting in place a management system on its two sites that is the only one of its kind in West Africa. In addition to the processes it implements to monitor and renew the ISO 14001 certification awarded to its two mining sites by the French Quality Assurance Association (AFAQ), AREVA regularly carries out or commissions external audits in a number of areas which usually include occupational safety, health, the environment and transportation.

Thus, in 2004 and 2005, we asked the French Institute for Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety (IRSN), an expert government body, to conduct a number of on-site studies into our environmental monitoring, the radiological impact of the SOMAÏR and COMINAK mines, and the quality of the water we distribute to the town dwellers.

Niger's National Radiation Protection Center (CNRP) was involved in these studies and the results were made public. The IRSN concluded that the environmental monitoring systems on the two sites were generally consistent and complied with international standards, and found that the water distributed to local populations met the most recent WHO recommendations. It also suggested a number of avenues for improvement, all of which AREVA is acting on.