



UNDERSTANDING ORGANIZATIONAL POROSITY: A CASE STUDY OF A PUBLIC ENTERPRISE IN SUBSAHARAN AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper examines how African enterprises can be considered as places of connection between the formal and informal economies. It presents results from a survey carried out in a public enterprise in the DR Congo that made it possible to highlight two major characteristics:

- The African enterprise can be considered as offering two opportunities to its members. It gives, on the one hand, the opportunity for employees to be linked with the formal economy that offers a minimal social security, even if it is, sometimes, precarious. On the other hand, it becomes the place of informal economy. That is a place for the individual strategies that meet the needs for survival and gives a solution to the incapacity of the enterprise to suitably fill its engagements towards its employees.
- The second characteristic is the necessity of adopting a new vision in the way of analyzing the African enterprise.

Key Words: African enterprise • Human resource management (HRM) • Informal and formal economies • Employees practises

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INTRODUCTION

The major part of literature in management proposes to understand the enterprise as a rational instrument of production, whose members pursue “common goals”, expressed in terms of economic rationality and intended to provide normative prospects to the management in order to improve organizational effectiveness.

This vision of the enterprise characterizes most of the studies that try to understand the practices of management in Sub-Saharan African enterprises. Kamdem (2002) notes, especially for the case of French-speaking countries in Africa, that there is a fundamental rupture between theoretical knowledge as taught in the university (in Africa), and the concrete practices of the actors in African enterprises. The universal perspective of management based on the rational vision of management is not able to bring concrete solutions to the problem of dysfunction in African enterprises.

When we explore some studies related to the management of African enterprises (D'Iribarne, 1987, 1990, 1998; Hernandez, 1997; Kamdem, 2002; Desauney, 1987; Henry, 1997; Obembe et al, 1999; Labazée, 1990; B. Ponson, 1990, etc.), we note that the dominant paradigm in the literature explaining problems of management in African enterprises is based on the cultural approach. This approach explains the difficulties encountered by the African enterprises as due to the inadequacy of the "imported" western methods of management in the African enterprise where actors are embedded in the local culture. It mentions some African cultural features that are constraining actors in the enterprise to adopt rational economic way of acting. The oft-quoted cultural features are: primacy of the group over the individual, the respect of elders, the importance of relational considerations in the decision making rather than the neutral consideration as stated by the management rules, etc. (Culture-Development - QUID PRO QUO, Management and African Cultures, n° 20/21, 2-1995).

This cultural approach is not able to explain the fact that, in the same cultural context, some enterprises do have successful management and good results while others do have difficulties to manage their resources. In order to clarify these positions in the literature, we decided to carry out a survey in some public enterprises in Congo. The aim of this study is not to look for general conclusions, which can be applied to all sub-Saharan African enterprises, but to understand how the actors' practices in the enterprise deviate or converge with the explicit management rules in the enterprise. We propose to start the exploration of the actors' practices from the result of a survey carried out in a public enterprise in the Democratic Republic of Congo. The public enterprise has been chosen as framework for a case study because it offers an opportunity to understand both formal and informal activities in the context of Sub-Saharan organizations.

COLLECTIVE SYSTEM OF ACTION AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK POINT OF ENTRANCE TO THE ANALYSIS

The universal perspective of management, which was thought as a *best way* by many consultants intervening in African enterprises, failed to resolve most of the difficulties encountered in the majority of African enterprises. A. Henry (1998) notes, from the experiments of the French experts intervening

in some African enterprises, that despite their diagnoses with an impeccable logic and their recommendations many times republished, the situation of these enterprises hardly developed. For the lack of a better explanation, many experts conclude that the dysfunction of African enterprises is due to the tension between the domestic logic, dominant in the African culture, and the neutral economic logic, dominant in the western methods of management.

The universal approach of management and the cultural approach are mostly limited in terms of scope and variables taken into account for the analysis of African enterprises. The first approach (universal) is mainly focused on internal organisational variables and gives little place to others variables, especially those outside the organization. The second approach (cultural) gives principal place to the culture (outside variable) and tends to ignore some internal organisational variables. It explains actors' behaviours within the enterprise as a consequence of cultural constraints. As we noted previously, this cultural approach is not able to explain the differences observed in two organizations, departments, etc., evolving in the same cultural context. We therefore propose to adopt a different perspective of the analysis. Our starting point is the perspective given by Crozier and E. Friedberg (1977) Friedberg (1993) to analyse the collective actions system, instead of analysing the "organization". The analysis of the collective action postulates that actors within the organization can pursue different goals that are not necessarily compatible with those of the organization. They have a margin of relative freedom, which is subject to the contingency. The actors intervene within the framework of a limited rationality.

This leads to consider the African enterprise as a place of a plurality of rules where different actors, inside and outside the organization, contribute, within different concrete systems of action, to attend different goals. Considering the plurality of actors, rules and concrete systems of action as a framework for analysing African enterprise is an innovative way to encourage a different perspective of analysis in the enterprise. Applications of such thought are largely absent in most of the African management literature. Concretely, the approach proposed by Crozier and Friedberg (1977), also designed as the organizational approach, could help in understanding the African enterprise in a new perspective, one different from the dominant cultural approach.

The object of this approach is to understand how the cooperation between individuals, always being the result of ceaseless negotiations, is organized. Compromises resulting from these negotiations, where everyone tries to gain some personal profit, are at the origin of a complex system of power relations between the members of the organization. It determines what Crozier and Friedberg (1977), Friedberg (1993) call the concrete action system of the organization, which can be compared to a social order. In return, this concrete action system regularizes the interpersonal exchanges by establishing conventions that everyone learns to observe. It comprises a set of abstract rules, which determines the real operating mode of any organization or community.

According to these authors, the operation of the enterprise could be best understood only by sizing how individuals are responding to their working conditions in accordance to their place inside a power relation system, always specific, influencing its operation at the point of determining it. In other words, to understand how an organization really works, it would be necessary to describe and represent the concrete action system, which animates it. This concrete action system is necessarily arbitrary and contingent. This is why, except in theory, two similar companies, two local communities, two departments of a same university, never operate in the same way. This theoretical framework offers a different perspective to explain organizational phenomena. Nevertheless, the case study carried out in a Congolese public enterprise in Kinshasa will help us to judge its relevance in the context of African organizations and, if necessary, propose adapted tools to analyze management in African enterprises.

SURVEY CARRIED OUT IN A PUBLIC ENTERPRISE IN CONGO (D.R.)

Methodology

The aim of the survey carried out in a public enterprise in Congo was to understand the elements of the differences between actors' practices and management rules in the enterprise. We decided to focus our attention on a specific object: the human resource management's practices in the enterprise. This qualitative investigation was based on in-depth semi-directive interviews with several categories of workers and members of management, at various levels of the hierarchy. This technique of collecting information was completed by the observation on the ground and some documentation. The interviews with workers and management were carried out on the workplace during a period of 45 days. Our interviews concerned 24 actors located at various levels of the hierarchy and were completed by informal discussions with various internal or external actors. Some interviews were recorded with a previous agreement of the people interviewed, whereas others were gathered by taking notes. The data gathering was based on the multiplicity of testimonies and cases inside the same space of action in order to compare different points of views. The analysis of interviews was based on same directives: considering the point of view of the multiple actors in the organization (concrete system of action), taking into account particular positions of the actor in the system of action and retaining the recurrent elements emerging from the comparison.

The theoretical model of analysis

In order to concentrate on specific objects for our investigation, we decided to focus on the analysis of some practices of human resource management (HRM). Three elements were chosen: the recruitment practices, the remuneration practices and the promotion practices. The main purpose of the analysis was to understand how the official rules diverged or converged with the concrete actors' practices on the ground. And furthermore, how do these actors explain this difference or convergence in view of their experience on the ground?

The collecting of several testimonies from actors, working at SEGIT, will be analyzed by considering the environment (context) not as a homogenous element influencing actors' behaviour but as constituted of two specific contexts: the internal context of a specific enterprise and the external context, shared by many enterprises evolving in the same area or field of production.

Two new questions will lead us during the analysis:

- How does the enterprise, and its internal environment, help employees to concentrate on the organizational goals or to pursue them?
- How does the external environment act on the internal working environment, within the enterprise?

Two postulates can be given as ways to consider the internal and external contexts for analyzing actors' strategies within the enterprise.

First, we consider that the internal context is merely determined by the nature of management leadership in the enterprise. This leadership is linked to the nature of relationship between actors (from inside or outside the organization) intervening in the concrete action system.

Secondly, the relevance of the external context in the way internal rules are used in the enterprise depends on the nature of management's responses to employees' needs. This means that our analysis model will have to identify, each time, the following elements:

- Actors involved in concrete action systems;
- Stakes and constraints dominant between actors involved in a concrete action system;

- Actors' strategies related to the nature of the action system.

Presentation of the company: SEGIT

SEGIT is a public enterprise specialized in the field of transportation. The firm exploits and manages an integrated chain of transport made up of seaports, a railroad and a river system. It is a bureaucratic organization, characterized by the abundance of the impersonal rules and a strong centralization of the decisions at the higher levels of management.

At SEGIT, human resources management is formally organized and conducted by a department that is in charge of all the personnel problems and assure that official rules are respected in the way people are managed.

Most of the official rules in managing people at SEGIT come from the collective convention or some directives from the top management. They are stabilized rules, previously negotiated between the management and the labour union and evolving in a context of bureaucratic organization (almost 12.000 employees) with a low level of flexibility.

When we explore the official structure of SEGIT, we note that this public enterprise, like many others in DR Congo, is composed, on the one hand, of "actors from the politics" (state or government representatives, ministers in charge of state portfolio) who have official power to revoke or nominate the managers of the enterprise and people on the board of directors and on the management committee. On the other hand, the enterprise comprises internal actors (management, executives, trade union, etc.).

A high level of social tension within its employees and a low level of control by the top managers to keep the command of the enterprise for a good period of time characterize this enterprise. As it is also observed in many public organizations in the Congo (DR), especially the public administration, SEGIT has some difficulties to pay its employees regularly at the fixed period of time. Usually, employees stay several months without being paid. These elements characterize the nature of the context in which our survey is conducted. They offer an opportunity to better understand the context of our analysis and to look for conclusions which should not be generalized to the entire African continent.

Multiplicity of actors in "concrete action systems" at SEGIT

In this section, we would like to introduce different elements linked to the nature of practices affecting human resources management at SEGIT, as presented by different actors at different level of hierarchy. We would like to understand the nature of the internal and external actors intervening in "concrete action system", the nature of stakes and the constraints dominant in the recruitment process, the promotion of candidates and the remuneration. By focusing our attention on "the concrete action system", we are interested not only by formal aspects of management but also by the informal aspects of rules as applied on the ground. This position will help us judge the dominant explanation of mismanagement in Sub-Saharan Africa as a cultural phenomenon and advance some propositions in the way organizational analysis should be tackled in the Sub-Saharan African context.

- *Recruitment and promotion practices*

Official HRM rules, at SEGIT, state that recruitment of new candidates must be based on qualification and skills of the candidates that have to match specific needs of the enterprise. The process of selection for new candidates has to look for a "right man" to be placed at a "right place".

The formal process in recruiting candidates at SEGIT states that the enterprise has to send its offer to the national bureau of employment, which is then supposed to detain database for potential candidates

in search of an employment. The enterprise also has to largely diffuse the information about the job application through the media in order to reach a large public. Candidates responding to the profile will be retained and asked to do specific tests. The process will be gone until the needed candidate is selected and hired.

If this process can be judged as idealistic in many books of management, the concrete situation on the ground helps us to notice that actors' practices are different from what the rules state. Various discussions with multiple actors enabled us to retain three remarks concerning the processes and contents of the recruitment at SEGIT. Initially, we noted that the job offers are not widely diffused in the media so as to reach general public. The enterprise does not send its offer to the national bureau of employment. Information in connection with the job offers is limited to a scale of specific actors (top managers, Human resource department, service user, sometimes the ministry in charge of the state portfolio) and disseminated from mouth to ear. Top managers explain the lack of publicity on the job offers as a way to avoid troubles related to the intervention of political actors in the context of general unemployment. They still use recommendations known as "political" which are forms of injunctions to managers in order to hire their candidates, independently of their skills, or lack thereof. It is not rare that such a minister or an influential personality of the presidency influences considerably the choices of the candidates in the internal process of recruitment in the enterprise.

An executive at the department of HRM explains this situation: "It is more usual for us, as we conduct the recruitment process in the enterprise, to discover that very often same candidates without the needed profile have support from the top management or politicians and will get the job whereas those with good profiles, if they do not have support or are not politically recommended, will be dismissed. As a matter of fact, even the actors from the top management do have their own candidates (people close to them that they sometimes, or usually, support because of the high levels of unemployment). In this context of absence of a national social security policy, continues the executive, when you become a manager, everybody (family, relatives, etc.) has to count on you to resolve their problems. In our enterprise, we experiment it by the way that sometimes we engage candidates without profiles because politicians or managers recommend them."

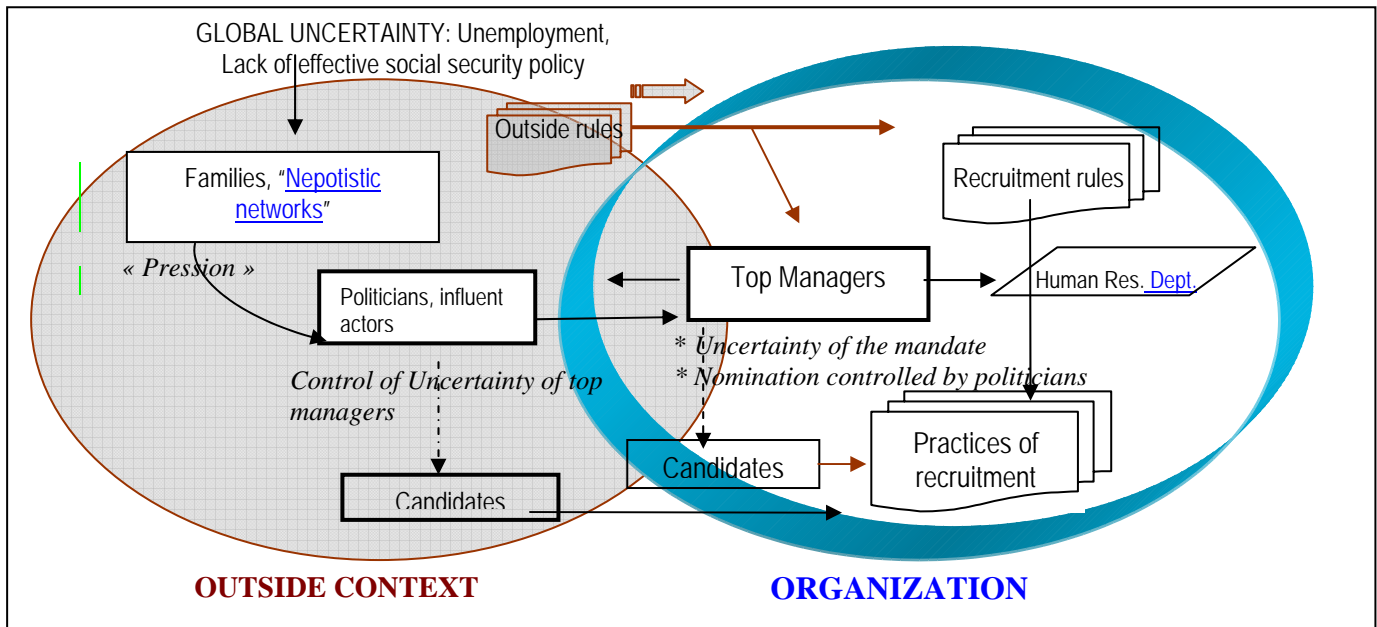
"The consequence of this system, affirms another executive, is that sometimes we engage and assign people to positions for which no needs are felt in the company whereas true needs are not being satisfied. In addition, there is no coherent training policy for employees." This situation is also observed in the way people are promoted in the enterprise. A middle manager at SEGIT explains the fact that everybody, even those without necessary qualifications, sees himself as a potential candidate for a higher position in the firm: "In our enterprise, people come to say: do I not have brother who is a minister in the government or a person in the political higher realms? So, I also can reach a higher position in the enterprise by using the outside relationship to modify the internal rules of management. If I gain a position as a manager or a head of department, I cannot refuse a service to those who helped me to reach my position."

During an interview, we noticed the fact that the multiplicity of actors (internal and external) intervening in "concrete action systems" disturbs the way internal rules are applied.

An executive explains us the difficulties he gets with one of his employee by using formal procedures described in the enterprise: "A few days ago, I write a letter to one of the employees in my service requesting an explanation about a failure I observed in the way he was working. Instead of explaining himself, as required by the procedures, he responds to me with a copy of his letter sent to the head of department, the president of the enterprise, the members of the management committee and the chairman of the board of directors. Next morning, I receive a phone call from the chairman of the board very angry with me because of my letter... Finally, a problem, which was purely internal, was politicized to touch other aspects not directly related to the work..."

The recruitment, seen as one of the stake between actors in concrete action systems, can be represented by the figure below. This figure is also applicable for other elements of HRM such as the promotion or the remuneration in the enterprise.

Figure 1: “Concrete action system” in the recruitment process



This example helps us realize that many actors are intervening in the recruitment process. We have official actors (HR Department, top managers) and unofficial actors (politicians, families, etc.). The control of uncertainty from an actor toward another actor engaged in a relationship explains the fact that some outside rules to the organization can be prevalent in a concrete action system that affects the concrete practices of HRM. This is not mainly a cultural fact but one of the power mechanisms between actors in the organization. In other words, it becomes illusory for those who want to analyze African enterprises to explain the observable actors' behaviours only by the rationality of the organization, its structures or its objectives. To fully understand the actors' behaviours in the organization, one has to analyze the influence between both the inside and the outside contexts. The concrete action system as a framework of analysis helps to reach this goal. How about the practices of remuneration at SEGIT?

- *Remuneration practices*

Since a decade, SEGIT has had difficulties to pay regularly the wages of its workers. The delays in the payment of salaries can reach up to three or four months. The payment of salaries has been the motto for many social movements and strikes, which sometimes leads managers to lose their job.

However, in spite of these difficulties and the low level of salaries, it is surprising to see that every morning employees always go to work. How is it possible when these employees are not paid? This is another question we explored during our survey. Our analysis made it possible to notice that generally, the enterprise presents a double opportunity. In one hand, it offers to the employee a contract, which is a form of social security in the way that the medical fare and some social charges identified by the collective convention of the enterprise will be supported by the enterprise. People outside of the organization, in the Democratic Republic of Congo and in many other countries in Africa, do not have a social security provided by their state. They have to rely on family solidarity to overcome their

problems. On the other hand, workers consider the enterprise as a good place where they can develop their own activities for surviving.

Our observations also made it possible to note the emergence, in the workplaces, of new activities not directly related to the work for which employees are paid. For example, the executive secretaries use the small refrigerator in their office, to conserve soft drinks and sell it to their colleagues. They thus bring from home some drink racks and they keep them behind the cupboards of the office. For restocking, they use cleaning employees by asking their own service to go outside the enterprise to buy soft drinks that they will conserve in the office refrigerator. These cleaning employees will be paid, by the end of the day, a small amount of money necessary to assure their transportation of return back home after the work.

Besides the sales of drinks on the workplace, we discover also the sale of sandwiches, cakes, etc. The agents can, during working hours, come to the office to buy these products with the advantage that they can take them by credit and pay the addition at the end of the day. These small activities are responding to the real needs of workers at the workplace for which the enterprise does not have adequate solutions. In certain cases, these activities extend to other activities such as clothing or using mobile telephones as a public cabin by putting an advertisement (poster) in the corridor of the building indicating that in such room or office, an agent places at the disposal of the public his mobile telephone by invoicing the cost of call per minute. That also supposes that during the hours of service a visitor or a colleague can come to make his phone call.

Another example of difficulties being encountered by employees is the reimbursement of their medical invoice by the company at the time when they deal with the emergency and engage their money instead of waiting for bureaucratic procedures and signatures at the hierarchical level before they have enterprise support for medical expenses. Our talks made it possible to note that some of these invoices take two to three years before being reimbursed. However, some workers, being in the decision circuit, propose to their colleagues the assistance for a quick refunding of their invoices. They ask then to have a commission in percentage of the amount to be paid to their colleague. However, in such a case, the recipient of the refund should agree to sign the cash voucher as having received the totality of the refunded amount whereas his colleagues already withdrew their part in the amount. These observations are not alleviating. They inform us on the nature of collective action systems in which various actors evolve as well as the nature of their strategies. The lack of appropriate responses from the state to offer a minimum social security to its population conducts that population to invent its own mechanisms for surviving, which are generally designed by the informal economy. These activities are not only outside of the formal economies, but they are also developed inside the organization when the level of uncertainty is perceived as high. The enterprise is perceived as a place of work but also as a place of smartness where the actors can set up multiple strategies to supplement their incomes by secondary activities, sometimes haggle over the services rendered to customers or even to colleagues in the same organization by asking them commissions.

The actors in the organization are also forced to develop individual strategies to survive or accumulate resources to face the uncertainty of the future in the context where the enterprise does not offer sufficient psychological or social security for its employees. This is why Tom D. Herdt and S. Marysse, in their study about the strategies of surviving in Congo (1996:7), insist on the fact that the distinction between the formal and informal sectors is not adapted in the African context because if in a normal economy, according to the current approach, one can make the distinction between modern economy and illicit activities and survival, in Congo (their case of study) this categorization is illusory because the State "modernisator" dissipated itself. The informality is everywhere and especially where the formal organization is dominant.

The observation made on the ground during our investigation helps us also to understand the way formal and informal rules are interacting outside the formal organization. We observed as well some concrete examples which made it possible to understand the mechanisms of "bankruptcy of the State and its recombining by the actors", like mechanisms contributing to the pluralism of rules and the

porosity of the organizations, particularly in the public sector. The most striking example that we observed at the time of our investigations is related to the road traffic and the rules of the highway code. The degradation of the roads, which is almost generalized, and the incapacity of the highways department or of the office in charge of the maintenance of roads to fill its role properly, pushes motorists to sometimes cut through their own path while borrowing, for example pedestrian ways, in contradiction with the rules of the highway code and the lack of suitable indication by the police.

The emerging practices end up by replacing the "official rules", thus scrambling the official reference marks. In this case where the state is absent, moreover, some people (often unemployed) take individual initiatives to repair the road by filling the holes with stones or sand, while this prerogative is reserved to the state. The motorists, who find answers to their concrete concerns while the State is absent and does not manage to satisfy – in spite of the payment of various taxes of road traffic – its obligations, consider such an initiative as acceptable. However, the impromptu repairer of the roads often places himself on the road with a carriage filled with stones or sand and begins his work. At each passage of a vehicle, he humbly asks a voluntary contribution to the motorists. At the end of the day, he can collect a sum of money, which can help him afford his needs for a day's worth of food for his family. Even at the level of the state, described as in bankruptcy, deficient official activities are being replaced by individual initiatives, which become a private affair (self-employment), responding to a specific need of individuals.

CONCLUSION

This case study helps us to identify that the enterprise is a place where different actors from inside or outside are intervening to reach different objectives with different stakes, not all necessarily linked to the enterprise's objectives.

Multiplicity of actors (internal or external) within the organization can be explained by the term of "porosity". An organization will be considered as "porous" if the external actors are dominant in the way management rules are applied in the enterprise. Whereas, it will be considered as "less porous" if the internal (official) rules and actors are dominating the way resources are managed. The informality is not only linked, as J.D. Reynaud argued (1988), to the nature of regulation in the enterprise (control, autonomy or joint regulations) but to the nature of "porosity" in the organization. It depends on the nature of dominant actors in "concrete action systems".

The porosity of an organization can be explained by the nature of actors intervening in the concrete action system. For the case of actors from management and those from the political scene, a strong leadership based on the control of uncertainty by managers regarding the length of their mandate gives more power to them in their relation with actors from the political sphere (who officially have the power to revoke or maintain managers of public enterprises). Every internal actor has the possibility to link with outside actors in order to influence internal management processes, even if this linkage is formally identified and prohibited by the collective convention. For this reason, these relationships are, most of the time, publicly not expressed but remain the basis of the action (emergence of new rules). Actors give the appearance of remaining behind formal rules while they are using informal rules.

One of the main questions, this survey has been carried out, was to understand elements that determine the actor's strategies in a case of a specific public enterprise characterized by high social tension. We would like to verify if the cultural explanation is sufficient to explain the complexity of concrete action system between different actors on the ground. Our analysis helps us to reach an intermediate conclusion, which must be confronted the analysis of various other cases.

Our conclusion is to consider that there is a link between the nature of controlled uncertainty (power) by the management and the way resource are managed in the enterprise. If the uncertainty is dominant

in the management and not controlled by it, the informal rules, from those who have the control of uncertainty, will be dominant and affect the way formal rules are applied in the enterprise. In this way power, defined in a relational perspective as to capacity of an actor to control the uncertainty over an other actor, is the key way to understand what the literature describe as mismanagement in the African context. The impact of management on the personnel depends on the level of porosity of an organization. The less the organization is “porous”, the more the impact of management is dominant on the personnel. If the enterprise is more “porous”, the impact of management on the personnel is lessened and the organization is dominated by outside rules.

Our survey at SEGIT corresponds to the case of an organization that is “porous”. The HRM is dominated by informal rules from the actors who control the dominant level of uncertainty in the concrete action system. SEGIT can be regarded as the place of a plurality of concrete action systems, where various internal and external actors are interacting. The "high level of uncertainty" has been identified as the main factor that contributes to the shift of formal rules. The uncertainty plays out differently according to the position of actors. For blue-collar (manual) workers, uncertainty relates to short-term scale. It is related to the wages and the date of the payment of salaries. For the executives and the personnel of collaboration, uncertainty carries on medium-term scale, for example the improvement of the social condition by promotion. For top managers, the uncertainty relates to a long-term scale. The strategy consists in quickly acquiring large incomes to ensure long-term survival.

These results must be supplemented and confronted with other case studies carried out in enterprises with different characteristics but evolving in the same general context.

What comes out from this analysis is the need to consider to the study of management in African enterprises not only as limited by the formal aspects of the organization (structures, policies, organization charts, etc.) but also by considering the dynamics of concrete action systems where diverse actors, from inside and out, are intervening in the way practices are evolving in the organization. That supposes, for the analyst to take into account a multitude of actors in and apart from the organization and to study the mechanisms that allow such interactions.

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