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Social movement struggles against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso

Bettina Engels*

Otto Suhr Institute for Political Science, Free University of Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Abstract In reaction to the global food price crisis, people marched in the streets of numerous cities of the Global South, protesting against unaffordable prices for foodstuffs. This article investigates the conditions that enabled this mobilisation. It analyses the case of Burkina Faso, where protests were particularly intense. Building on approaches from social movement studies, it is argued that in Burkina Faso, temporal political opportunities (the price crisis opening up a window of opportunity) and dynamic politico-institutional structures ("cycles of contention"), in combination with social movements' organisational resources, explain the way the price issue was framed and why mobilisation was possible.

Résumé En vertu de la crise globale des produits alimentaires, les gens ont défilé dans les rues de nombreuses villes du pays du Sud pour lutter contre le prix inabordable des denrées alimentaires. L'article présente les conditions qui ont permis cette mobilisation. Celui-ci analyse l'étude de cas du Burkina Faso dans lesquelles les manifestations étaient particulièrement intenses. En s'appuyant sur les approches des études en mouvements sociaux, il est affirmé qu'au Burkina Faso, les occasions politiques temporelles (la crise de prix menant à une ouverture aux nouvelles possibilités) et les structures politico-institutionnelles dynamiques (« des cycles de discorde »), en combinaison avec des ressources organisationnelles des mouvements sociaux, expliquent la façon dont la question du prix est énoncée et la raison pour laquelle la mobilisation est rendue possible.

Keywords: political protest; social movements; cost of living; Burkina Faso; Africa

Introduction

How do actors who have relatively limited access to material resources succeed in organising to identify shared political aims and mobilising in order to articulate these aims? This question has been discussed within social movement studies since the 1970s, referring, for instance, to homeless people (Cress and Snow 1996; Wright 1997) or the unemployed (Bagguley 1991; Croucher 1987). In their path-breaking study on "poor people's movements", Frances Fox Piven and Richard Cloward (1977) argued that vulnerable groups only protest in times of drastic social, political and economic change. "Weak" actors are unlikely to protest because they lack necessary resources, such as money and external support (McCarthy and Zald 1977). Most empirical studies on this explore cases from Northern America and Europe (for case studies on Latin America, see Isbester 2001; Schneider 1995). At the same time, academic fields such as development or area studies frequently analyse mobilisation and protest by poor people and vulnerable groups, but only sporadically refer to the concepts and theoretical approaches from social movement studies (for example Ballard et al. 2005; Edelman 2001; Scott 1987). In Latin American

*Corresponding author. Email: bettina.engels@fu-berlin.de

Studies, social movements are comprehensively studied both empirically and conceptually, referring to, for instance, landless workers' movements, environmental justice movements, mining protests or feminist movements (Bebbington, Abramovay, and Chiriboga 2008; Eckstein 1989; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Prevost, Oliva Campos, and Vanden 2012). In contrast, in African Studies, social movements largely remain under-researched and under-theorised. Only recently, a debate came up regarding whether and how concepts which emerged from research referring to empirical contexts in the Global North and West also apply for the study of protests and social movements in Africa (Brandes and Engels 2011; de Waal and Ibreck 2013; Ellis and van Kessel 2009).

In this article, I investigate mobilisation by trade unions and other movement organisations in the Global South. The analysis focuses on protests against the high cost of living related to the food price crisis of 2007–2008. Global food prices, as measured by the food price index of the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), increased by one and a half times from February 2007 to February 2008.[1] In many poor countries in the Global South, prices on the local markets rose rapidly in early 2008 (Bello 2009; Mitchell 2008; von Braun 2008). The causes are manifold: high oil prices, the expansion of biofuel production, poor harvests due to extreme weather, decreasing stocks, changing demand patterns (in particular, rising meat consumption in the Global North and in the so-called emerging economies such as China) and financial speculation (FAO 2008a, 3–6; Oxfam International 2008; Holt-Giménez 2008; Stage, Stage, and McGranahan 2009, 33).[2] In more than 20 cities worldwide, most of them in Africa,[3] large numbers of people protested against price increases of 50 per cent or more. In most cases, protests focused not only on high food prices but also on social inequality and political repression and on ruling parties and presidents, who had often been in power for many years or even decades (Amin 2012; Bush 2010; Harsch 2008; Patel and McMichael 2009; O'Brien 2012). Though the socio-economic impacts of the food price crisis were similar in many African states, unrest occurred in many – but far from all – locations. Where protests took place, they differed in form and extent. To explain this discrepancy, quantitative studies point to macro-structural and institutional factors such as the poverty level, urbanisation and regime type, arguing that these correlate to the likelihood of protest occurring (Arezki and Brückner 2011; Berazneva and Lee 2013; Hendrix, Haggard, and Magaloni 2009). Moreover, governments reacted to the price increases in different ways and at different speeds, and some cushioned the crisis better than others (FAO 2008b; von Grebmer et al. 2008).

I will analyse the case of Burkina Faso, where particularly intense protests against high food prices have occurred since February 2008. An alliance of labour unions, the student movement and human rights and other civil society organisations mobilised for general strikes and mass rallies and succeeded in pressuring the government until it yielded to at least some of the protest's central claims. How did the social movements in Burkina Faso succeed in mobilising people into collective protest action such as demonstrations and strikes?

This article aims to generate empirically based insights into how social movements in the Global South successfully mobilise into protest and other forms of collective action. The analysis refers to three basic theoretical approaches from social movement studies: political opportunity structures and processes, resources and framing. It argues that, in the case of the protests against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso in particular, short-term changes in structural conditions explain why mobilisation was possible. The global food price crisis was an important temporary factor, as it opened up a window of opportunity for oppositional actors on the local and national level. When the protests against the high cost of living are analysed not as a single period but embedded in previous and subsequent mobilisation, it becomes clear that they represent one "cycle of contention" which is closely linked to others, namely the struggles for democratisation in Burkina Faso from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s and the mobilisation against

impunity, starting after the death of journalist Norbert Zongo in December 1998. With regard to resources, the protests against the high cost of living became possible because social movements could compensate for the lack of material resources by using organisational resources and national and local networks. In addition, the "the high cost of living" frame was crucial to the success of social movement organisations in mobilising to protest.

The article is structured as follows. It starts by introducing resource mobilisation, political structures and framing three main approaches from social movement studies. The following section will present information on methodology and data. Then, the protests against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso from early 2008 onwards are presented and embedded in the historical context. They are analysed with respect to the movements' resources, opportunity structures and the specific protest's frame, "the high cost of living" (*la vie chère*). It is concluded that temporal political opportunities and dynamic politico-institutional structures particularly elucidate the case-specific framing of the price issue in Burkina Faso, and why mobilisation was possible.

Under which conditions do social movements emerge and succeed?

When the study of social movements emerged as a field of research within the social sciences, a central imperative was to abandon the idea of collective action being irrational, emotion-driven and dangerous (for an overview, see Opp 2009). Thus, early social movement theorists built upon theories of collective action and emphasised the intentionality and rationality of political protest. Resource mobilisation as one of the first theoretical approaches within this field outlined the importance of organisational structures and resource accumulation for mobilisation: social movements and movement organisations have to acquire resources in terms of money, personnel, organisation and external support (Gamson 1975; McCarthy and Zald 1977). Resources are thereby not necessarily only material but can also be moral, cultural, socio-organisational or human. At least to a certain degree, different types of resources can compensate for one another (for example, missing material resources can be compensated for by human or socio-organisational resources; Edwards and McCarthy 2004, 117, 143). In particular, as McAdam, Tarrow, and Tilly (2001, 59) state, organisational resources are extended by the "social appropriation of existing organisations".

In opposition, the political opportunity structures approach argues that political protest cannot be explained by focusing exclusively on resources; rather, the context from which social movements and other protest actors arise is pivotal to explaining their emergence, impact and so on. Strategies, aims and forms of protest are not chosen in a vacuum but rather influenced by a variety of structural conditions, such as the openness of political institutions, the existence of political allies, disunited elites and the government's repressive capacity, among others (Kitschelt 1986; Meyer 2004; Tarrow 1996; Tilly 1978). This is not to say that agency was not central for explaining social movement emergence and processes, but that agency can best be understood related to its specific context. Political opportunity structures are "consistent – but not necessarily formal, permanent or national – dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations for success or failure" (Tarrow 1998, 19–20). Structural factors can be temporary; typically events that open up a "window of opportunity" for mobilisation and protest activities. The core of the political opportunity structure argument is that people engage in social movements and protest when patterns of enabling and hindering structures are shifted, and that they strategically deploy a certain "repertoire of collective action", thereby creating new opportunities for contentious collective action. Sidney Tarrow (1998, 19–20) calls these processes "cycles of contention", emphasising that opportunity structures are dynamic; they are created, contested, shifted, de- and reconstructed

through the interaction of protest actors and authorities. Oppositional actors, through collective action, change political structures and improve conditions for protest (or, in some cases, for their adversaries).

Framing, the third main concept in social movement studies, refers to the ways in which actors in contentious politics present a specific problem through their discourses and practices; the causes, solutions and means of action they derive from the problem; and the deployment of these discursive frames for protest mobilisation (Benford and Snow 2000; Snow 2004). Frames as a set of shared beliefs and meanings do not emerge by themselves but are produced by social movement actors; these actors are "engaged in the production and maintenance of meaning for constituents, antagonists, and bystanders or observers. This productive work may involve the amplification and extension of extant meanings, the transformation of old meanings, and the generation of new meanings" (Snow and Benford 1992, 136). Within the cycles of contention, frames are, first and foremost, set by the actors who are engaged in the protests from the very beginning; for movements and organisations that join later, it is not easy to change a frame once it has been established. Frames construct a link between structural conditions and the mobilisation of protest; they provide an explanation as to why successful mobilisation occurs at some times and not at others, even when conditions are similar (Snow and Benford 1992, 143–145). Though theory often still deals separately with resources, opportunities structures and framing, in the empirical world, they are inseparably entangled, as will be demonstrated in the case study.

Though a wide range of case studies on social movements in Africa exists (for example Alexander 2010; Epprecht 2001; Langdon 2010; Zeilig 2009), and research in this field is growing,[4] social movement studies in general still pay little attention to Africa. Theoretical concepts claim to be applicable beyond cases and empirical context, but are in fact developed almost solely against the backdrop of phenomena in Europe and the Americas (della Porta and Diani 2006; Opp 2009; Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1978). With regard to social movements in Africa, only in recent years have scholars from both area and social movement studies started to reflect upon the appropriateness of "classical" theories and analytical concepts (Brandes and Engels 2011; de Waal and Ibreck 2013; Ellis and van Kessel 2009). Some authors thereby outline specific aspects in which social movements in Africa systematically differ from those in other regions, such as the particular relevance of external influences (Larmer 2010, 257), as well as of religious and ethno-nationalist movements (Brandes and Engels 2011). De Waal and Ibreck (2013) emphasis that protest, resistance and social movements are highly context-dependent phenomena: contemporary social movements – in Africa as elsewhere – can only be understood embedded in the historical and sociopolitical context they have emerged from, therefore the political systems in which contentious collective action take place is particularly significant.

Methodology

Field research for this case study was conducted at four locations in Burkina Faso (Ouagadougou, Banfora, Bobo-Dioulasso and Koudougou) from October to December 2011 and in August and September 2012. All four locations witnessed intense protest, both spontaneous uprisings in late February 2008 and subsequent organised protests (strikes, marches, sit-ins and so forth) by trade unions, students and human rights organisations. The food riots were not planned or organised by the trade unions and their allies, but rather spontaneous uprisings by weakly organised urban subclasses, mostly youth who struggle along without regular, gainful employment. In all four locations, as well as in numerous other towns in the country, trade unions and civil society organisations formed alliances as local *Coalition nationale de lutte Contre la Vie Chère, la corruption, la fraude, l'impunité et pour les libertés* (CCVC, the civil society organisations alliance that mainly organised the protests) branches. Regarding the protests, each town features its own

peculiarities: the first food riots occurred in Bobo-Dioulasso on 20 February 2008. Riots in Bobo-Dioulasso and in Ouagadougou, where they broke out one week later on 28 February, were the most intense. In Ouagadougou, in addition to the riots and mobilisation by the trade unions and other civil society organisations, one party politician, Nana Thibaut, launched an appeal to take to the streets and protest against the high prices, which reinforced rioting. In the Banfora region, the students and human rights movement played a minor role in the protests compared to other places, and the trade unions' activities were addressed less towards the public sector (education, health) but more focused on the government's intent to close the state-owned sugar mill. Koudougou in particular is known for its tradition as a "rebel city" (Hilgers 2010). Koudougou is the home town of journalist Norbert Zongo, and massive protests spread through the country starting in Koudougou in February 2011 after the death of student Justin Zongo (who is not related to Norbert Zongo).

Primary research methods included 35 interviews, plus four focus group discussions (FGDs). Interview partners were current activists from youth organisations, trade unions, the student movement (university and high school students), human rights organisations, women's organisations and merchant and consumer organisations. Almost all organisations and interviewees played an active role in the CCVC and the protests. Interviewees came, for instance, from the trade union federation *Confédération générale des travailleurs du Burkina* (CGT-B) and its member unions (particularly the primary and secondary school teachers' unions), the *Mouvement burkinabè des droits de l'homme et des peuples* (MBDHP, one of the most active human rights organisations in West Africa), the women's organisation *Kebayina* and the national student association *Union Générale des Etudiants Burkinabè* (UGEB). In addition, seven representatives from state authorities (national ministries, province authorities, mayor) and one journalist and one opposition party politician (Nana Thibaut), who were both important actors in the protests, were interviewed. Other party politicians were not interviewed, as the study focussed on the CCVC protests, in which political parties did not participate. Interviewees were predominantly male, reflecting the fact that men were largely over-represented among both protesters and authority representatives. Participants in FGDs were trade union members in Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso and local market women in Banfora and Ouagadougou. Interviewees were selected to include almost all member organisations of the alliance that organised the protests, as well as merchants and students who played a key role in the protests. State representatives were selected from a range of institutions and political levels (local, regional, national). The interviews focused on the emergence of the 2008 food riots and subsequent protests, the various forms of protest and strategies of mobilisation and the actors' assessments of the price crisis and its impact on Burkina Faso. Secondary sources included: press reports; documents from international organisations, national ministries, the parliament and NGOs; and leaflets and journals from trade unions and human rights, student and youth organisations.

Protests against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso

In Burkina Faso, from January to February 2008, food prices increased by 30 per cent for meat, 44 per cent for corn and 50 per cent for cooking oil (Mission Conjointe Gouvernement, Agences du Systèmes des Nations Unies, and ONG Save The Children UK 2008, 5). That the world market crisis struck Burkina Faso and other African states so hard was rooted in long-term structural causes, in particular the tendency to focus on commercial agricultural production oriented towards the world market instead of emphasising local food security. Going back to colonial agricultural policies, this was further enhanced from the 1970s onward in the context of the debt crisis, structural adjustment and world trade liberalisation (Amin 1973; McMichael 2009). In Burkina Faso, structural adjustment programs were implemented in the early 1990s.

Comprehensive cuts in public spending and the privatisation of formerly state-owned firms resulted in increasing unemployment and decreasing wage levels (Education International 2009). In January 1994, under pressure from the IMF, the West African CFA franc was devaluated, which weakened purchasing power further.

In Burkina Faso, protests against the rising prices started in late February 2008, with shopkeepers at the local markets of Bobo-Dioulasso and Ouahigouya marching against the implementation of a communal development tax (*taxe de développement communal*, TDC). The planned duty on mopeds, motorcycles, cars and trucks had been approved several years earlier, but it would now come into force at a point when prices for consumer staples were rising enormously.[5] Within a few days, food riots occurred in several cities in the country. Public buildings, shops and petrol stations were damaged. Road blockades were erected and set on fire. Numerous people were injured and hundreds arrested.[6] The trade unions immediately called for other civil society groups to assemble, and on 12 March all major trade unions, consumer and professional associations, human rights organisations and the student and youth movements set up a new alliance: the *Coalition nationale de lutte Contre la Vie Chère, la corruption, la fraude, l'impunité et pour les libertés* (CCVC 2008a). The coalition initiated a first central demonstration in Ouagadougou on 15 March 2008 and a country-wide general strike on 8–9 April and 13–15 April 2008. Several further mass rallies in Ouagadougou were organised, for example on 15 May 2008, 8 April 2011 and 26 May 2012.[7] Led by the trade unions, namely the CGT-B, the CCVC is the main force in the current mobilisation against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso.

This is not to say that all civil society groups and social movements are united within the CCVC and its struggles or that they are homogeneous and void of internal conflicts and contradictions. Important civil society organisations such as the *Ligue des Consommateurs du Burkina* (Burkinabè Consumers' League), which was among the founding members of the CCVC, share the CCVC's demands but collaborate with state institutions in implementing the government's measures against high prices (for example, by managing shops for subsidised foodstuffs).[8]

From 2008 onward, the Burkinabè government adopted various measures, such as temporary price fixing, the suspension of import duties and value added taxes (VAT) on staple goods and the establishment of shops for subsidised foodstuffs (called *boutiques témoin*; Africa Research Bulletin 2008; AN 2008; Chouli 2012b; Zahonogo, Bitibale, and Kabre 2011). In 2011, the government suspended the communal development tax and reduced wage taxes while increasing salaries in the public sector (*L'Observateur Paalga*, 28 April 2012). The CCVC member organisations declared both developments to have been the government's reactions to the protests.[9] As concessions were only made three years after the initial protests, it can be assumed that the measures taken were rather an appeasing attempt by the government during the political crisis in 2011. Moreover, the changes did not affect the entire population evenly. In Burkina Faso and other West African states, the great majority of the activists involved in the protest movements are salary earners and high school and university students whose ties to the rural subsistence farmers are often weak (Hagberg 2002, 227). Increasing food prices hit poor people in rural areas to a similar extent as in the cities, but it is mostly the urban middle class that participates in and benefits from the "success" of the protests against the price increase. This has already been outlined in the 1970s, relating to structuralist arguments on over-urbanisation and the "urban bias": urban groups such as students and public sector employees are, relative to their proportion in many developing societies in general, over-represented in trade unions, political parties and other actors who are able to put pressure on governments and enforce their interests (Bates 1981; Lipton 1977; compare with Walton and Ragin 1990). In Burkina Faso, more than 70 per cent of the population lives in rural areas[10] and seldom have a salary or own a moped or car;

thus, the TDC and wage tax decreases do not affect them to nearly the same degree as the urban social classes that dispose of these endowments (Chouli 2012b, 140–142).

Conditions enabling the mobilisation: resources and political opportunities

What conditions and processes enabled the mobilisation against the high cost of living in Burkina Faso? The global food price crisis and the prompt and rapid price rise in the local markets provided a window of opportunity for movement organisations to mobilise. Burkinabè movement organisations have relatively limited access to material resources such as state funding or funding by private foundations, religious organisations, international donors and the like, private donations, membership fees and so forth (for a systematic overview of sources of material resources for social movement activities, see Edwards and McCarthy 2004, 120–125). The protest actors managed to compensate for the lack of material resources by using other types of resources at their disposal; in particular organisational resources, building upon experiences made and networks developed in years of previous struggles. The student movement and the trade unions have a long tradition of political protest dating back to the 1960s. Upper Volta's (the country's name was changed to Burkina Faso in 1984) first president after independence, Maurice Yaméogo, lost power in 1966 after massive trade union protests (Englebert 1996). In the 1980s, students mobilised to turn over Yaméogo's successor, General Lamizana.

The trade unions and the student movement had also been the main drivers of the democratisation in Burkina Faso in the late 1980s (Englebert 1996). The CGT-B, the leading organisation within the CCVC, was founded in 1988; the MBDHP just a year later in February 1989. The student organisations, UGEB and the *Association nationale des étudiants burkinabè* (ANEB) even date back to the year of independence, 1960 (Bianchini and Korbéogo 2008; Sory 2012). Personnel overlaps among the organisations are frequent, and almost all functionaries of the CGT-B, its member unions and the MBDHP were previously engaged in the student organisations (Loada 1999, 34). Protests for democratic reforms, particularly by public sector employees (Bratton and van de Walle 1992, 423), emerged during the first phase of structural adjustment (Burkina Faso's first structural adjustment programme, the *Programme de facilité d'ajustement structurel renforcé*, was implemented from 1991–1993).

In Burkina Faso, the trade unions have always intervened in national politics beyond labour-related issues. As far back as the early 1990s, they mobilised to protest against the disparity of increasing prices and stagnating incomes (Englebert 1996; Education International 2009; Federici and Caffentzis 2000). On these grounds, they were able to take up the issue of the price increase so promptly in February 2008 because the cost of living had previously been on their agenda. Moreover, the CCVC was able to successfully mobilise protests on short notice because of its heavy administrative and personnel overlaps with the *Collectif des organisations démocratiques de masse et de partis politiques* (Collective of the Democratic Mass Organisations and Political Parties, or *Collectif*). The *Collectif* was formed in early 1999 by trade unions, human rights and student organisations, opposition parties and women's and lawyers' groups following the death of journalist Norbert Zongo, who was killed in December 1998. Zongo, editor of the weekly newspaper *L'Indépendant*, had investigated the death of David Ouédraogo, who was a chauffeur of President Blaise Compaoré's brother, François Compaoré. Ouédraogo was accused of theft, and instead of being brought to trial in the regular way, he was taken by the presidential guard and finally died in the presidential palace's infirmary (Frère 2010; Harsch 2009; Hilgers 2010). Until now, the CCVC and the *Collectif* continue to exist simultaneously and with large personnel overlaps, but differ in two main aspects: first, the human rights movement is the main actor within the *Collectif*, whereas the CCVC is led by the trade unions; and second, other than in the *Collectif*, political parties are excluded from the CCVC. Functionaries

of both alliances explained in interviews that this was a conscious decision, building upon the experience in the *Collectif* that party politicians can abuse the civil society alliance for individual power purposes. The CCVC has not removed the *Collectif*, but the protests' focus shifted from political and civil rights towards socio-economic issues under the frame of "the high cost of living".

Since the 1990s, when the social movements that later allied with each other in the *Collectif* struggled for human rights and democratisation, the political regime in Burkina Faso had been persistently under pressure by social movement and civil society activists (Chouli 2012b; Federici, Caffetzis, and Alidou 2000; Harsch 2009; Hilgers and Mazzocchetti 2010; Hilgers and Loada 2013; Loada 2010). The protests reached a peak in 2011, when massive protests arose after the death of Justin Zongo, a young man who died in the town of Koudougou on 20 February after being detained by the *gendarmerie*. These protests triggered one of the most severe political crises in the country since Blaise Compaoré seized power in 1987: soldiers mutinied in Ouagadougou in March, and one month later even the presidential guard revolted. President Compaoré temporary escaped the capital and could only re-establish his authority by dissolving the government and discharging the prime minister after weeks of mass protests and mutinying security forces (Chouli 2012a; CNP 2011; Hilgers and Loada 2013). Most CCVC organisations were involved in these protests after the death of Justin Zongo in 2011. The 2011 crisis also enabled the protests against the high cost of living to be revitalized: after large protests in 2008, there was relatively low mobilisation in 2009 and 2010, but subsequent to the struggles related to the death of Justin Zongo, the CCVC succeed in organising one of its largest marches on 8 April 2011 (Chouli 2012b).[11]

A year later, when petrol prices increased by 50 per cent, causing local transport fares to rise by 25–35 per cent, the coalition resumed its protests against the high cost of living. A central demonstration was organised in Ouagadougou on 26 May 2012. In 2013 and 2014, both oppositional political parties and the trade unions and civil society organisations played a central role in protest mobilisation when tens of thousands of people took to the streets on a number of occasions and protested against Blaise Compoaré's attempt to revise article 37 of the Burkinabè constitution in order to enable himself to run for a fifth term (Loada and Romaniuk 2014; ICG 2014; ISS 2014).[12] However, political parties and civil society organisations hardly protested jointly: for instance, mass demonstrations on 18 January and 23 August 2014 were organised by the opposition parties, whereas the CCVC mobilised for a march on 20 July 2014.[13] That the mobilisation continued beyond the global food price crisis of 2008 indicates that the crisis was just one (though a particularly effective one) of several events triggering social movement mobilisation (others included the death of Justin Zongo, the subsequent national political crisis in 2011, the petrol price increase in 2012 and the planned referendum concerning article 37 of the constitution). The food price crisis provided a "window of opportunity", a temporary change in the opportunity structures, that favoured mobilisation. The February 2008 riots were also part of this "window of opportunity". Though for some functionaries of trade unions and other social movement organisations the riots arose unexpectedly,[14] they provided a convenient occasion for them to mobilise.

These processes can also be described as "abeyance" (Taylor 1989; Taylor and Crossley 2013): in situations of relatively hostile political environments, when favourable political opportunity structures are missing, social movements can continue to exist by orienting their activities not against an unapproachable or hostile adversary but addressing the inside of the movement itself (compare with Sawyers and Mayer 1999). This is what many trade unions and civil society organisations in Burkina Faso did in times lacking opportunity for mobilisation: holding workshops for activists, organising internal training activities, producing member journals and so forth.

Framing "the high cost of living"

The discursive frame of "the high cost of living" plays a decisive role in the continuity and extent of the current mobilisation of protest in Burkina Faso. This framing succeeds in linking more or less all of the relevant issues and actors within Burkina Faso's current social movements. This comes through in the all-embracing name of the CCVC. In July 2008, the CCVC declaration of demands also reflected the broad range of organisations that form the alliance: it contained demands for higher salaries and wages in the public and private sectors, "a significant and effective price control" for staple foods, cost-free basic education, freedom of the press, freedom of expression and freedom of assembly (CCVC 2008c). Calls for central protest actions are formulated in a similarly broad way: "No to the high cost of living, to corruption and impunity! No to the liquidation of weak industries in the state of Faso!"; this was one of the slogans at the demonstration of 15 March 2008, for instance.

The frame refers not only to staple food prices but also to the cost of living in general. It encompasses three causal analyses that correspond to the thematic fields of Burkina Faso's most influential social movements and demonstrates the way in which the protest actors refer to one another in their arguments. First, reflecting the trade unions' struggles, "the high cost of living" is presented as a problem resulting from the steadily growing wage–price gap. By depicting the problem not as rising prices alone but as the combination of inflating prices and stagnating incomes, the central demand of the protests matches that of the trade unions: a significant increase in salaries and wages, aiming to strengthen purchasing power (CCVC 2008b).[15] Trade unions claim that the wage increase must be higher than usual in order to compensate for the higher prices (CGT-B 2011, 104).[16]

Second, in the protesters' analysis, "the high cost of living" is rooted in the rising costs of basic social services, especially education, resulting from privatisation and structural underfunding. This argument serves to integrate high school and university students into the protests against "the high cost of living"; students have been a major political force in Burkina Faso since the late 1980s (Hagberg 2002). They argue that with rising prices and stagnating or only slightly increasing incomes, families can no longer afford school fees, books and other expenses of their children's secondary or tertiary education.[17] Thus, the student movement's demands fit seamlessly into the frame of the current protests. The students' struggles in Ouagadougou and the (few) other university locations in Burkina Faso have always primarily addressed the precarious economic conditions in which most Burkinabè students live (Loada 2010; Mazzocchetti 2010). As they see it, the recent price increase further perpetuates their difficult situation.[18]

Third, "the high cost of living" is framed as a human rights issue. The protesters present the rising prices as an indicator rather than a cause of "the high cost of living". They argue that, aside from stagnating incomes and the underfunded health and education sectors, corruption and "bad governance" also play causal roles: the governmental elite enriches itself at the expense of the population, and public funds trickle away due to corruption.[19] In one of the CCVC's founding documents, the member organisations state: "The fundamental causes of this situation [the high cost of living] [are] the mismanagement of the human, material and financial resources of the country, characterised by corruption, fraud, impunity for political and economic crimes" (CCVC 2008b, 1). Through this argument, human rights organisations tie in to the protests as well, particularly the influential MBDHP.

Conclusion

Facing rapidly rising food prices, people act individually and collectively: daily meals are reduced from three to two or from two to one; non-essential expenses are cut; people strike and

demonstrate for wage increases, food subvention, price controls and more. There is no doubt that the food price crisis severely impacted poor people and vulnerable groups in the Global South. However, the price crisis and its socio-economic impacts did not automatically result in protest. This article has analysed the case of the protests related to the food price crisis in Burkina Faso from a social movement studies perspective. The case study has pointed out that the price crisis triggered protest as it opened up a window of opportunity oppositional actors could use for mobilisation. The trade unions and their allies have relatively limited material resources at their disposal; not only in global comparison, but also against the backdrop that due to structural adjustment policies, many trade union members and activists (in Burkina Faso as in many African states primarily public sector employees) have become impoverished. Though one could say that most activists of the CCVC member organisations belong to the middle classes – public sectors employees, students and so forth – most of them are rather equipped with middle-class expectations and formal education rather than with material wealth. Thus, relative deprivation is an important factor motivating the protests against the high cost of living.

Though their material resources were limited, activists could compensate for this with other resources, in particular socio-organisational ones; using the window of opportunity on short notice was possible only because the social movement organisations could build upon experiences and networks from previous long-standing struggles. Protests in Burkina Faso present a typical case of "cycles of contention", where, from the late 1980s onwards, the trade unions and other social movements' mobilisation paved the way for the protest related to the 2008 food price increase, which then by itself reinforced the pressure on the president and government. When civil society protests occurred again following the death of Justin Zongo in 2011, revitalization of the CCVC's activities was facilitated. In opposite to quantitative studies on the likelihood of food price protests (Arezki and Brückner 2011; Berazneva and Lee 2013; Hendrix, Haggard, and Magaloni 2009), which put emphasis on relatively static structural factors such as the level of urbanisation or poverty, the case study analysis reveals that, rather, dynamic structural conditions are decisive.

Furthermore, the case study has also demonstrated that political opportunities facilitate activities of social movements and other oppositional actors but do not solely explain why mobilisation succeeds or fails. In the case of Burkina Faso, socio-organisational resources were pivotal. These organisational resources – networks and experiences from previous struggles – are also reflected in how the issue of the price increase was framed by the protest actors for mobilisation, thereby successfully interlinking almost all relevant social movements in the country and their central claims (namely the trade unions, students and human rights movement). Against the backdrop that these existing networks and organisational structures were the most important resource that enabled the protests, and that the trade unions were the driving force in the alliance, it is hardly surprising that the protests clearly addressed a national agenda. Thereby, the framing "the high cost of living" primarily referred to the trade unions' core demands: to increase wages in order to increase purchasing power. Which frames are developed, prevail, succeed or fail must be explained in case-specific ways in relation to the political-institutional backdrop and the resources the respective movements have at their disposal. As the case study analysis has demonstrated, organisational resources, political opportunity structures and social movement framings that succeed to mobilise for collective action are interwoven and linked to one another. With regard to the question of how far theories and concepts on social movements are universally applicable, the case study has confirmed that, as de Waal and Ibreck (2013) argued, protest and social movements can only be analysed when embedded in their respective historical, cultural and socio-political context. However, this holds true not only for African contexts, but for all social movements, and likewise in the Global North and South.

Biographical note

Bettina Engels is a junior professor in Empirical Conflict Research focusing on sub-Saharan Africa at the Free University of Berlin. Her research focuses on global change and local conflicts, struggles over land and natural resources, contentious politics and sub-Saharan Africa (Western Africa, Horn of Africa).

Notes

1. FAO food price index, FAO website.
2. For a discussion of the various explanatory factors, see Akram-Lodhi (2012, 120–121).
3. *Africa News*, 12 August 2008, 18 July 2008, 16 December 2008, 12 February 2009, 28 May 2009, 12 June 2009 and 8 August 2009; *The Guardian*, 9 April 2008, *IRIN*, 31 March 2008; Amin (2012); Berazneva and Lee (2013); Harsch (2008, 15); Janin (2009); Maccatory, Oumarou, and Poncelet (2010); Schneider (2008); Sneyd, Legwegoh, and Fraser (2013).
4. See, for instance, special issues of *Genèses*, no. 81, 2010; *Review of African Political Economy*, 37 (125), 2011; and *Stichproben – Vienna Journal of African Studies*, 11 (20), 2011
5. Interviews, CCVC and member organisations, Bobo-Dioulasso, 25 November 2011, Ouagadougou, 2 September 2012.
6. Amnesty International (2009); *Ouestaf News*, 28 February 2008.
7. *Fasozine*, 19 March 2011; "La CCVC demande au gouvernement de LAT de réduire significativement le coût de la vie!" (press conference/press release, 7 May 2012), CCVC/Le comité d'organisation, "Toutes et tous ensemble à la marche meeting du 26 Mai 2012 contre la vie chère" (leaflet, May 2012).
8. Interview, Ouagadougou, 5 September 2012.
9. Interviews, CCVC member organisations, Banfora, 24 November 2011, Ouagadougou, 3 December 2011, 2 September 2012.
10. World Development Indicators, World Bank website.
11. I am particularly grateful to one anonymous reviewer for making me aware of this aspect.
12. Presidential elections were scheduled for November 2014, but on 31 October, Blaise Compaoré was dismissed after several days of mass protests. By the time of writing, the army commander-in-chief had taken over power transitionally. In principal, elections shall be organised within the coming months.
13. I highly appreciate the clarifying comments by one anonymous reviewer on this point.
14. Interviews, trade unions, Ouagadougou, 10 November 2011; trade unions, human rights and student movements, Bobo-Dioulasso, 25 November 2011.
15. Interviews, student movement, Ouagadougou, 16 November 2011; professional association, Ouagadougou, 19 November 2011; trade unions, Ouagadougou, 19 November 2011, Banfora, 22 November 2011; human rights organisation, Banfora, 24 November 2011; youth organisation, Ouagadougou, 3 December 2011.
16. Interview, trade unions, Ouagadougou, 2 September 2012.
17. Interviews, trade unions, Ouagadougou, 10 November 2011; trade unions, human rights organisation and student movement, Bobo-Dioulasso, 25 November 2011.
18. Interviews, student movement, Ouagadougou and Bobo-Dioulasso, 16 and 25 November 2011.
19. Interviews, human rights organisation, Ouagadougou, 16 November 2011; shopkeepers, Banfora, 24 November 2011, Ouagadougou, 2 December 2011; trade unions, Bobo-Dioulasso, 25 November 2011.

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