

Civil society to the fore



The multiple global crises have had a varied impact on Benin's economy and the population as a whole has become more vulnerable, especially the poorer members. Civil society has worked both as a partner and in liaison with Government in promoting ways to combat the crisis, develop a new green revolution and provide school food programmes. It has also encouraged investment in agriculture and combating climate change, as well as technological exchange.

Social Watch Benin

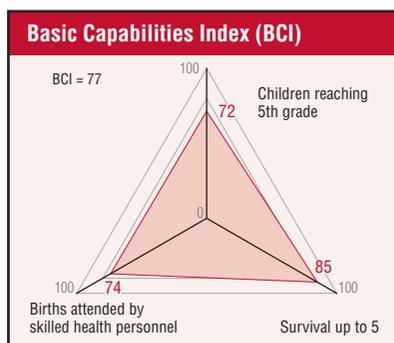
The multiple global crises have had a varied impact on the economy of Benin. Villages have become more vulnerable, especially the poorer ones. Everywhere, options are narrower; funding for small and medium enterprises, as well as public aid for development and direct foreign investment, may dwindle.

President Yayi Boni, a former banker, expressed indignation when the outgoing president of the United States, George Bush, sought to mitigate the US financial crisis by placing USD 710 billion at the disposal of large US banks facing bankruptcy. This policy was imitated in the European Union, which committed more than EUR 1.3 trillion (USD 1.7 trillion) to bailouts. Asking rhetorically where this money would come from, Boni predicted that the world's poorer countries would end up paying for the crisis in the long run. In response to this threat to the wellbeing of those who already have least, he called for better world governance and reform of the United Nations, including two seats for Africa on the Security Council.¹

Financial and food crises

In Benin, the basic family basket is now beyond reach. Shipments of foodstuffs from rural areas to the cities have declined and the cost of building materials has increased. A number of construction projects have been halted, including some Government work. The State has had to use its power to requisition building materials for its most important projects. Rural villages, particularly the poorer ones, have been compelled to exhaust their economic resources; they can no longer invest in education and family health.

The increase in the cost of a barrel of oil, the development of agro-fuels and international speculation pushed the entire world, especially Africa, into an unprecedented crisis in 2008. Benin was hit by a general increase in the price of basic products. The price of maize, the most widely consumed product, soared 220%. Shortages exacerbated the hardships, as low farm productivity and growing demand led to the over-purchase of locally produced foodstuffs and reduced distribution to consumers, especially the more vulnerable ones.

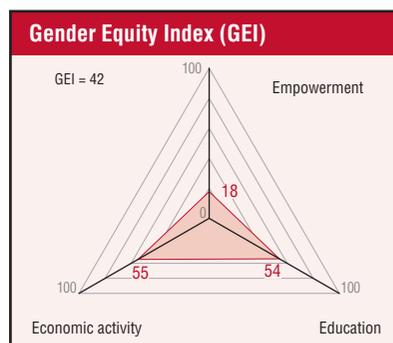


State measures

As it did in 2008, the Government has responded to the food crisis this year by cutting taxes and creating temporary food reserves through the National Bureau for Food Security. These measures partially eased the effects of the 2008 crisis. The chief beneficiaries, however, were traders, who continued to sell at high prices and made large profits at the expense of consumers and the State.

In other measures, the Government suspended the Value Added Tax and introduced subsidies for some foodstuffs (e.g., 25% for rice, milk and sugar) as well as price controls. To help enforce these, it launched a nationwide public awareness campaign and directed the National Bureau for Food Security to open offices in the country's 77 municipalities to monitor prices. The Government also established a national effort to control rises in the cost of living, decentralized through departmental and communal committees. The country also benefitted from major donations of rice, maize and sugar from Libya and the Gulf states.

Despite these measures, poorer and more vulnerable consumers derive little benefit from the subsidies and continue to have great difficulty obtaining food. The Government has failed to provide promised funding for the committees, which are largely ineffectual. Two long term programmes to alleviate the food crisis are now being implemented: the Urgent Programme to Support Food Security, budgeted at USD 128 million, and the Agricultural Diversification Programme for the Increase in Value of the Valleys, estimated to cost USD 20.5 million.



The role of civil society

Government campaigns to minimize cost of living increases were supported by civil society organizations. Consumer associations collaborated with the State in supervising prices and helped formulate proposals through their participation in the work of the committees monitoring the cost of living, the publication of press releases and the organization of press conferences.

The energy crisis

In response to the sharp rise in the price of oil on the international market, the population is using more adulterated fuel, known as *kpayo*. Official service stations selling oil products are rarely visited, which reduces State income.

The high price of fuel is particularly onerous in a country where barely one household in five (22.4%) has had access to a public source of electricity, according to the 2002 general census of population and habitat (RGPH-3). The remaining 77% relied on oil-based lighting. As far as the provision of electricity goes, Benin appears to have learnt nothing from the previous crisis. After waiting nearly a year for a solution to come from abroad – principally from a hookup between the Transmission Company of Nigeria and the Electrical Community of Benin – the country belatedly decided to acquire gas turbines. This is taking a considerable amount of time.

In the meantime, much of the economy has been paralyzed, in particular major industries and microenterprises. Consequences have included an increase in the price of cement, interruptions in the supply of drinking water and repeated disruptions of appliances (electrical household appliances, computers, etc.) in villages and towns. This has damaged both public and private enterprises. Businessmen

¹ See: <www.togocity.com/article.php3?id_article=3138>.

are finding it impossible to meet their commitments with financial institutions.

The State subsidized the price of oil for a considerable period of time, until it declared this had become financially impossible. When international oil prices fell, to discourage the informal sale of *kpayo*, which causes numerous problems for the population, the Government announced that it would sell oil at cost.

In response to Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) agreements at summit conferences in December 2001 and January 2006 to institute a system for exchanging electric power to meet growing demand in the region, member states created the Ghana-Togo-Benin 330kV Power Interconnection Project. This project, which requires a huge financial investment, is designed to encourage commercialization of electricity, improve distribution, help to reduce the cost of production and cover the shortfalls in hydroelectric power stations during periods of drought.

In addition, within the framework of its Strategy for Growth and to Reduce Poverty (SGRP), the Government has initiated reforms in the electrical power sector to a long-term increase in efficiency and provide a level of distribution that is satisfactory in both quantity and quality. It has also introduced tax incentives to encourage private operators to acquire electricity generation resources from the Beninese Society for Electric Energy.

The climate crisis

The climate crisis in Benin takes the form of increased variations in rainfall, a reduction in annual rainfall (projected to drop 15% by 2025) in the northeast of the country, an increase in extreme phenomena such as heavy rainfall and storms, a shorter rainy season, delays and irregularity in the commencement of the rains, and a long-term increase in the average temperature (up 1 to 2 degrees by the end of the 21st century). These changes will have a negative effect on agriculture, water reserves, and the lake ecosystems of lower Benin, as well as the country's coast, parks and natural reserves. Three-quarters of the port city of Grand-Popo is already submerged. Cotonou, the capital, to the east of the port, is being totally eroded. Some scenarios for 2035-2050 predict erosion will reach 40 cm.

The country's biodiversity is also expected to suffer. A major decrease in rainfall north of the 8th parallel will reduce the exchange of layers by 20% to 40%. In addition, it will lead to excessive exploitation of the water reserves on the Calavi Plateau, which will increase saline intrusion.

Forecasts indicate that by 2025, the proportion of the population living in cities will rise from 37% to 52%. The country urgently needs to review its urban transport system and the use of energy to reduce pollution. Climate change will have a direct impact on farm production. The rice yield is expected to fall 25% by 2050 and pole beans 15%, while production of yams, the basic food in central Benin, will increase by 4%. If these scenarios prove accurate, between 50% and 60% of the population of southern Benin will be facing food insufficiency, along with between

25.9% and 33% of inhabitants in the central areas of the country.

To secure sustainable exploitation of the basins in the Northwest despite climate change, the Government, with the support of German Technical Cooperation, has launched ProCGRN, a pilot project to conserve and manage natural resources. It focuses on 4 main areas:

- Raising awareness of the effect of climate change on living conditions amongst target groups and means of adaptation;
- Promoting integrated management of river basins to reduce erosion and improve water infiltration;
- Increasing the availability of drinking water and water resources for farming; and
- Disseminating the results achieved.

In addition, Benin prepared a National Adaptation Programme of Action (NAPA) for climate change, and has received USD 3.1 million from the World Environment Fund to implement it.

Climate change was discussed at the meeting of experts from Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in March 2009. The experts called for guarantees that the principal measures of an immediate and urgent nature contained in the NAPAs for climate change would be implemented. It was noted that by December 2008, 39 of the 48 LDCs had completed their NAPAs but only Bhutan had begun to implement its programme. This is an indication of the difficulty and complexity of applying the principal measures of adaptation. According to the Minister for the Environment and Protection of Nature, Justin Adanmayi, one of the critical points when applying a NAPA is access to LDC funds and the mobilization of the necessary complementary financial resources, especially the national contribution guaranteeing the realization of adaptation measures in situ.

Civil society groups have carried out awareness-raising campaigns in several populated areas regarding the degradation of the mangrove swamps, which reduces the productivity of lagoons considerably and threatens their ecosystem.

Recommendations

The food crisis

- Immediately respond to the urgent need for food to prevent malnutrition;
- Implement a new green revolution that greatly increases farm yield without depleting the soil, support small farmers as essential to sustained economic growth and the elimination of hunger;
- Introduce a national food programme for schools using locally produced foodstuffs and ensure that nutritional needs are met through national nutritional programmes;
- Greatly increase investment in farm research, in particular in the areas of high-yield crops and livestock, as well as sustainable farming techniques, water control, with particular attention

to the likely effects of climate change;

- Promote the production, transformation and consumption of appetizing local foods; and
- Encourage disadvantaged members of the population to become economically active through Income-generating Activities (AGR, in French) and the development of micro-finance initiatives.

The climate crisis

- Strengthen the powers of leading actors in the issue and those with responsibilities relating to climate change at national, departmental and communal levels;
- Create a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the problems generated by climate change that includes plans of action at each level of the State;
- Integrate the theme of climate change into primary, secondary and tertiary curricula;
- Support NGOs, which are the real link between government and local communities;
- Initiate in-depth research regarding technological transfer and local knowledge that could facilitate adaptation to the negative effects of climate change. ■