

## Without dialogue or planning there can be no sustainable development



The country has been unable to implement a development model based on long-term planning. The economy is shrinking and inequality is worsening at an alarming rate, but the Government is squandering the budget on propaganda and creating yet more jobs in the bureaucracy. The country has been badly hit by natural disasters that have caused havoc in agriculture, health and education, and it is only too evident that the Government had no contingency plans in place. There has been some progress (though not enough) in improving health care and access to potable water, but overall the country's most pressing need is for a sustainable development model that works.

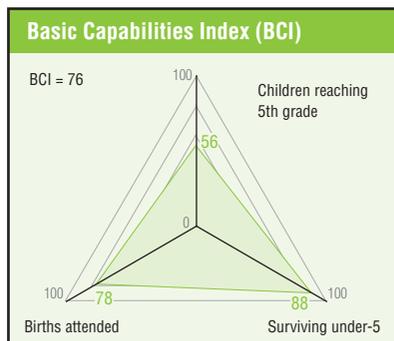
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The Government has been unable to implement a workable sustainable development model. It has refused dialogue with the different sectors of society and shown a complete lack of commitment to transparency or eradicating corruption. Its strategies to tackle economic and environmental problems not only reveal a lack of long-term planning but also cannot lead to sustainable development because they do not consider environmental or social problems. To put it bluntly, these policies have failed utterly.

For example, the economic growth rate fell from 5% in 2008 to 3% in 2010.<sup>1</sup> The world financial crisis has hit hard, especially in terms of reduced exports and falling incomes, and Benin has serious problems in that its departments (or provinces) are very unequal, with a particularly marked difference between the poorest, Alibori, and the richest, Littoral.<sup>2</sup>

### Public employees

In recent years there has been a marked increase in the number of public employees.<sup>3</sup> This is partly because there is no adequate pay policy outside the public sector, but another reason is that the State apparatus has returned to how it used to be, with party politics heavily involved in public organizations. The Government has not stimulated the creation of new jobs in the private sector. This emphasis on the public sector has made for increased State expenditure and the Government has no compunction in using State funds for propaganda purposes and to create more jobs in the ministries.

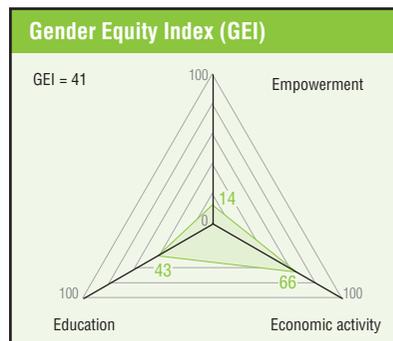


### No planning for natural disasters

The Government has also failed to make adequate plans or take contingency measures in environmental matters such as natural disasters. Between July and October 2008 heavy rains caused the rivers to rise and there was flooding in West Africa. Benin was one of the countries that suffered most: at least 150,000 people were displaced and there were outbreaks of cholera, meningitis and yellow fever.<sup>4</sup> The floods also ruined crops, leading to food insecurity.

In 2010 this happened again when the Quémé and Niger Rivers rose much more than usual, causing major floods that damaged hundreds of houses and schools, left thousands of people homeless, destroyed large areas of crops, killed livestock and again led to disease outbreak. The flood victims were given shelter in schools, where they remained until November when the waters finally subsided and they were able to return to their homes.

These disasters had a very serious negative impact on education, for example, because access roads to education centres were washed away or simply remained under water. According to a November 2010 report by the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) Benin, the floods damaged more than 425 public schools throughout the country and more



than 91,000 schoolchildren were affected as their schools were wrecked and/or teaching materials were washed away.<sup>5</sup>

The Government's response to this disaster was to allocate funds and emergency supplies to the value of CFA 20 million (USD 42,944) for the victims, including mosquito nets impregnated with insecticide, medicines and clothing, but this was simply not enough and the country subsequently had to appeal for international aid to help the displaced people. It was made apparent that the Government had neglected to provide many essential supplies, and the consequences of this failure were so serious that many of the victims were forced to sell the goods they received under the rescue plan to meet their most basic survival needs. To make matters worse, the distribution of aid that had been donated by the private sector, in addition to Government aid, was entirely in the hands of the authorities while civil society organizations, including Social Watch, were excluded from the process.

### Climate change

There is general agreement in the scientific community that climate change has increased the risk of this kind of natural disaster. It has also been established beyond doubt that human activities are a factor in global warming. Benin is among the countries that release the least greenhouse gases

<sup>1</sup> Index Mundi, *Benin Economy Profile 2011*, <www.indexmundi.com/benin/economy\_profile.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), *Benin*, <www.sdc.admin.ch/en/Home/Countries/WestAfrica/Benin>.

<sup>3</sup> BBC News, "Public Sector Growth Accelerating".

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, "Floods in West Africa raise major health risks," (19 August 2008), <www.who.int/mediacentre/news/releases/2008/pr28/en/index.html>.

<sup>5</sup> UNOCHA Benin, "Benin Floods Situation Report," 8, no.4 (November 2010), <reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/A793C314A84DD041852577D1006AB93F-Full\_Report.pdf>.

into the atmosphere, with emissions of only 0.3 to 0.6 tonnes per person in 2005 or a total of less than 2.6 million tonnes that year, compared to the industrialized countries that cause the most pollution of this type and reached totals as high as 7,200 million tonnes.<sup>6</sup> Countries with the most precarious economies, such as Benin, are suffering the consequences of the pollution the more developed world is pumping out.

As the climate change situation worsens, flooding will become a chronic problem and Benin will have to make an increasingly intense long-term prevention effort. However one of the Government's main shortcomings is precisely that it does not plan for the future or take precautions, so the problems stemming from climate change are likely to be particularly serious for Benin. In addition, there will have to be new strategies that improve agricultural production and at the same time reduce this sector's ecological and social impact.

The allocation of resources to reconstruction work after the ravages of the flooding will inevitably hinder and delay development programmes. Funds that could have been invested in research, development and the implementation of more efficient production models will now have to be diverted to rebuilding the country.

### “Circular agriculture”

In the last ten years the agriculture sector's contribution to Benin's economy has amounted to 35% of GNP, second only to the services sector, and agriculture employs some 45% of the total labour force.<sup>7</sup> Agriculture is facing serious problems including the fact that productivity is low, a high proportion of agricultural workers are living in poverty and large swathes of the available land are not used.

Over the last ten years the Government has launched three development plans that affect this sector. From 2003 to 2005 it implemented a poverty reduction strategy, and from 2007 to 2009 implemented a growth strategy to reduce poverty, but both of these initiatives tackled agricultural problems in a non-specific way. This changed with the 2008 Strategy to Reactivate Agriculture (PSRSA),

which was designed not only to ensure food security by 2015, but also to restructure the sector so it could contribute to Benin's economic and social development.

The PSRSA has various drawbacks, including the fact that the extensive use of fertilizers, which are needed if the programme's production targets are to be attained, might seriously damage the environment. Moreover the plan's agriculture growth model will seriously damage the soil. One of the consequences of soil erosion is that it reduces the ground's capacity to absorb water and this increases the risk of serious flooding. It is evident from this analysis that there are long-term defects in the strategies the Government is implementing and these are so serious that the policy cannot be considered a model for sustainable development.<sup>8</sup>

It has been suggested that the “circular agriculture” system, which was developed in China at the end of the 1990s, might be suitable for Benin (ibid.). This system is based on the so-called “circular economy,” which in broad outlines involves the efficient use not only of resources but also of waste. Recycling is an important part of the process, and thus a circular flow of materials is set in motion. For example, the heat that some processes generate can be used to activate other processes that require lower temperatures. The aim of this system is to create an economy that is more efficient and generates less polluting agents. The cornerstone of the proposed model in the sphere of agriculture is the efficient use of biomass resources, which includes energy sources.

Implementing a circular agriculture system in Benin calls for in-depth research into the natural resources available and a reformulation of the prevailing laws and regulations governing environmental protection and the use of resources. Another aspect to consider is the cost of acquiring the necessary technology, which could be an obstacle to adopting this production model.

One positive consequence of these circumstances is that the Government is gradually coming to recognize the importance of the agriculture sector. The plans implemented up to now have fallen

short of what is needed and have lacked a long-term perspective, but at least they have been steps, however faltering, in the right direction.

### Progress in other areas

Despite the development models being far from satisfactory, there has been some progress in terms of meeting people's basic needs. For example, a considerable effort has been made to improve the potable water supply in rural areas and as a result in 2009 some 55.1% of the rural population had access to this resource, a big increase on the 2003 figure of only 36%. However, it has been pointed out that greater growth could have been achieved if State planning in this respect had been more efficient.

As regards health, there has been a significant improvement in maternal and infant mortality in recent years. Maternal mortality fell from 474.4 deaths per 100,000 live births in 2002 to 397 per 100,000 live births in 2007 and infant mortality decreased from 86 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2003 to 63 deaths per 1,000 live births in 2010<sup>9</sup>. The HIV/AIDS situation is not as bad as it could be: the estimated rate is 1.8%, which is among the lowest in West Africa (in Ivory Coast, for example, it is 7.1%, in Nigeria 3.9% and in Togo 3.2%). Despite such hopeful trends, however, most health indicators are below what they should be in the context of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

### Conclusion

Sustainable development must inevitably be based on long-term planning and must involve consideration of the relations among the various actors in society, but as things stand, the Government's vision is not just limited but is actually responsible for the impoverishment of the people and the slowdown in economic growth. There is little dialogue between the Government, civil society organizations and other social sectors. Organizations such as Social Watch that are working actively to point out the Government's mistakes have made some progress in this regard but all too often they are blocked and intimidated by the powers of the State. ■

6 World Resources Institute, “Climate Analysis Indicators Tool (CAIT)”, <cait.wri.org>.

7 C.N Gangnibo et al., “Sustainable agriculture in Benin: Strategies for applying the Chinese Circular Agriculture model,” *Journal of Sustainable Development*, 3(1): 69–80, <www.ccsenet.org/journal/index.php/jsd/article/view/5354/4462>.

8 Ibid.

9 Index Mundi, Benin Mortality Rate, (2011), <www.indexmundi.com/benin/infant\_mortality\_rate.html>.