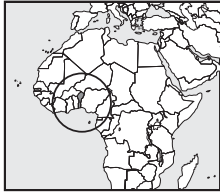


■ BENIN

Pressing objectives



National authorities and citizen organizations in Benin agree that without strong and lasting economic growth a significant reduction in poverty levels cannot be achieved. This African country is far from attaining the objectives stipulated five years ago in the Millennium Development Goals.

Social Watch Benin

The year 2005 is crucial for civil society organizations (CSOs), since ten years have passed since both the World Summit for Social Development (Copenhagen 1995) and the Fourth World Conference on Women (Beijing 1995). This year's agenda includes a follow-up not only of these two very important events, but also of the progress to date regarding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which should be accomplished by 2015.

At these conferences, world leaders and the international community committed themselves to finding ways to eradicate poverty and make gender equity a reality. This is why this MDG progress report for Benin has been written from the vantage point of the United Nations General Assembly Special Summit on the Millennium Development Goals to be held in September 2005 which will focus on these two problems.

The MDG campaign in Benin falls under a long-term vision called Benin 2005 or the "Alafia Scenario", both of which were outlined using a participative process undertaken by the Long-Term Perspectives National Studies programme.

Stemming from this orientation, the Government drafted a programme for medium term action (2001-2006) called the Second Government Action Programme. Another plan, known as the Strategic Document for Poverty Reduction (SDPR), was drafted to address problems requiring immediate attention in 2003-2005. This second plan, which is the framework par excellence for the implementation of the MDGs, is a global strategy to counter poverty that integrates all development dimensions without ignoring the essential role of women in the development process. The document states that without strong and lasting economic growth, a significant reduction of poverty cannot be achieved.

In July 2005 Benin presented its first official MDG report. The poverty and gender inequity situation is still alarming, and the report's conclusions - confirmed by civil society - raise doubts about the possibility of Benin achieving the objectives by 2015.

Poverty fighting actions

The Government of Benin initiated a participative consultation mechanism, which included the participation of civil society. This process allowed for a

poverty diagnosis and an identification of the priorities for how to reduce it in order to meet the MDGs in the framework of the SCPR mentioned above.

During the last trimester of 2003 Benin implemented various policies including the preparation and execution of the results based budget, the application of sector development programmes, the improvement of the regulatory and institutional framework of the public contracting system and economic liberalization through the privatization of some public enterprises.

There was some progress in strengthening the capacity of the poorest people to participate in productive and decision-making processes. Likewise, access to credit and savings institutions, as well as the development of community infrastructure, have improved.

These efforts, however, have been insufficient since they have had no striking impact on poverty, which has worsened. Between 1990 and 2003, the gross domestic product (GDP) growth rate hovered around 5%, but in 2004 it decreased to 3.2%, due to a downturn in economic activity.¹ The slowdown resulted from commercial restrictions imposed by Nigeria on certain products exported by Benin and the consequent decline in the performance of Benin's Autonomous Port of Cotonou, as well as competition from the Port of Lomé in neighbouring Togo. The serious cotton crisis must be added to this context since cotton is Benin's main export product. Poor governance and persistent corruption also played a key role in the decline.

The economy in Benin is far from having reached the real growth rate of 7% which is considered necessary for a significant and lasting reduction in poverty. It is also far from having its economic growth distributed in an equitable and reasonable manner. Almost 30% of the country's population of 6.77 million is poor. Half of the country's inhabitants are women and half are under the age of 16.

There are disparities within the country resulting in inequalities between the diverse social groups, as well as gender-related discrimination and development disparity between regions. Poverty is greater in rural than urban areas, although it has also in-

creased in the latter and affects mostly young people. Local governments do not have the financial resources required to reduce poverty. Households with an uneducated household head are the poorest and mostly situated in the rural sector. In general, poverty affects more women than men.

Almost half of the population is still unable to satisfy its basic needs such as education, health, safe drinking water and food.² The literacy rate of people over 15 years old is 38.9%. Malnutrition affects 16% of the population and 23% of children under 5 years old are underweight for their age. Additionally, trained staff are only present at 66% of childbirths. The country allocates only 2.1% of its GDP to health care services.³

Civil society proposals

Civil society proposes the following:

- production diversification to reduce the country's dependence on cotton,
- increasing budgetary allocations to essential community infrastructure and basic social services,
- the consideration of women's needs, especially with regards to their access to land and credit, in order to value and measure their economic contribution to the preservation, transformation and commercialization of agricultural products,
- the promotion of good governance and public access to all the information related to economic priorities,
- improving the capabilities, impartiality, and efficiency of existing institutional mechanisms put into place to follow-up on MDG progress, especially the Social Change Monitor (Observatoire pour le Changement Social) and the National Commission for Development and the fight against Poverty
- the establishment of departmental and community bodies to monitor the MDG campaign.

1 Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development. "African Economic Outlook 2004/2005: Country Studies. Benin", 2005, www.oecd.org/document/6/0,2340,en_2649_15162846_34862854_1_1_1_1_00.html

2 *Ibid.*

3 United Nations Development Programme. *Human Development Report 2004. Cultural Liberty in Today's Diverse World*. 2004.



Organized civil society

Benin has a very active and organized civil society which is involved in the fight against poverty, and carries out MDG advocacy, awareness-raising and lobbying campaigns. In the course of these actions citizen organizations have denounced situations that go against the objective of poverty reduction, contributed to the fight against corruption and heightened awareness among the population.

Nevertheless, the efforts of CSOs are impeded by weak participation in the national consensus framework set up by the Government. This does not permit that the objective of increasing participation possibilities for the poor in the productive and decision making processes be reached.

CSOs do not have free access to all information relevant to national economic management including how ministerial budgets are prepared and executed and how ministerial spending is controlled; programmes on public service privatization; the regulatory and institutional framework for public contracting; the involvement of local populations in community development; and the transparency of national statistics apparatus. CSOs are also impeded by weak institutional capacity for analysis when the above data is made available and an inability to formulate specialized and pertinent criticism for the proposal of coherent, lasting and efficient alternatives.

The promotion of monitoring by citizens must become a priority for the Government, for Parliament and for members of Parliament dedicated to development topics.

Gender inequity

Advances have been noted in the legal framework for the defence of women's rights as well as their promotion. Some examples are:

- The Code for the Individual and the Family which came into effect in August 2003.
- The adoption in March 2003 of a law on sexual and reproductive health.
- The adoption, also in March 2003, of a law prohibiting female genital mutilation, which establishes fines and prison sentences of six months to three years for violators (rising to five years if the woman is a minor and to ten years if the woman dies as a result of the mutilation).
- A penal code project to combat sexual harassment.
- A draft law on the prevention of child trafficking.
- The application by Parliament of the Additional Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, on the rights of African women. This document was adopted on 11 July 2003 by member countries of the African Union.
- The diffusion by women's NGOs of the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all

Forms of Discrimination against Women, which was ratified by Benin in March 1992.

- The strengthening of institutional mechanisms for the promotion of women.

However the above mentioned advances have not reduced poverty affecting women, nor have they raised women's participation in decision-making processes. The resources allocated by the State for the Beijing Platform for Action are insufficient and institutional structures have not managed to carry out concrete actions due to a lack of means and strategies.

Consequently, gender inequity still exists in various areas. Women's political representation and presence in hierarchical positions is very low. There are only five women out of a total of 83 members of Parliament; four women among 21 cabinet ministers; one among seven members of the Constitutional Court; two women members of the Economic and Social Advisory Council out of 30; one mayor and one political party leader. There are no women ambassadors. As an exception to the rule there are two women in very important positions - one serves as the Chief Justice of the High Court of Justice and another on the directorate of the Constitutional Court.

The gross enrolment rate, which includes the total number of children enrolled in primary school over the total number of school-age children, is 78.1% for girls and 110.46% for boys.

Violence against women

The prejudices and stereotypes which serve as the basis for discrimination against women are very conspicuous, and few women report the violence to which they are subjected daily. There are no specific laws which punish violence against women in the home, in the family, or in society as a whole. The persistence of inequalities is frequently tolerated by the State and society, who observe in silence under the false cover of religious arguments, tradition and customs.

Civil society participation

The contribution of civil society has been noteworthy. Pressure and advocacy from the sector resulted in the Code of the Individual and the Family being brought to vote and approved. More generally the work of these groups has improved the legal and institutional framework for the promotion and defence of women's rights.

The NGOs participating in these campaigns have experienced concrete success in the diffusion of the texts of laws and international instruments for the promotion of equity, and the training, awareness raising and education of women and people working in the legal sector. At the same time, they have denounced attempts to violate women's rights and offered support to defend these rights.

These organizations have integrated implementation, control and monitoring of women's rights policy into the heart of state-owned and non state-owned mechanisms. Lastly, their contribution to these topics has resulted in legislative reforms favouring the juridical status of women.

Conclusion

Only political will can put into practice the institutional reforms which have been approved. This can only be achieved though the combined efforts of the Government and its legislative and judicial branches, with civil society working as a willing partner. ■