
Education in Benin: “We were blind, but now we can see!”

*Richard Gerster**



The number of primary school students is increasing rapidly.

In October 2006, the newly elected President of the West African country Benin surprisingly declared kindergarten and primary school attendance to be free of cost. “Until the first of October we had received some 30’000 registrations for primary school, just like in other years. But after the president’s announcement there were 10’000 registrations more within three weeks”, remembers Antoine Adjibode, director of education in the Borgou-Alibori department the radical change. Until then he was faced with the fact that out of 100 primary school students only 10 went on to the secondary level. Many of the parents appreciate the values of education and have often built classrooms and employed teachers in the villages themselves if the state was not present. However, the families are simply too poor in order to persevere with their children’s schooling for several years. Now the government has begun to invest in educa-

tion on a large scale in order to recruit teachers and build classrooms.

Implementing free primary education is still an ongoing process and open air classes under trees are declining. 12’000 of the village teachers who used to be employed by parents have been taken on by the state and were trained. “But teachers still receive meagre salaries and it is not uncommon for them to work on their fields or teach private classes in order to make some more money”, says Ramata Adamou of the SILP project which is analysing the situation of schools in several villages. “The fact that school attendance is free has been communicated very badly. It is unclear whether only the inscription fee of five US dollars (2500 CFA) is being dropped or if the state is now also paying for the school infrastructure as well as books.” Recurring costs

such as exercise books and pencils remain the parents' responsibility.



In Sirarou's secondary school German is an optional subject in the curriculum.

Secondary school: Nothing is happening without parents' contributions

For example in the community of Sirarou, 25 km north of Parakou towards Niger, the situation is as follows: Being a community of roughly 8000 inhabitants, Sirarou has a kindergarten, three primary and one secondary school. 600 young people between the ages of 12 and 18 are attending secondary school, two thirds boys, one third girls. 23 teachers – one of them a woman – are teaching, for example French as the first

language and English or German as a second language. The students are divided into 11 classes but have only eight rooms at their disposal. Three of the classes are on the loose and use momentarily empty rooms. The parents' association has decided to build three additional classrooms and starting in 2008 all of them pay five dollars (2500 CFA) per child and year for three years. This contribution is in addition to the regular registration fee which amounts to 14 dollars (7000 CFA).

In the previous years the parents usually had to top up the school's budget in order to be able to pay the teachers. In 2007 this meant an extra amount of slightly more than 13 dollars (6500 CFA) in addition to the basic fees. Since 2008 the state is covering all staffing costs. "This takes a large burden off our shoulders, as poverty is very often a hindrance for school attendance", says Yarou Kabarougui, chair of the parents' association. The school principal Nicolas Semilinko confirms: "Those who could not pay had to be let go. So far about ten percent of all young people had to give up school and at least half of them because their parents could not afford to pay for it. In 2008 these cancellations could be reduced by two thirds."



15-year old Ezekiel Oron Bero is a student in the third year of secondary school.

Also at the level of kindergarten and primary school the state has doubled its subsidies for recurring costs from a little over four to eight dollars (2000 to 4000 CFA) and taken on the staff. "Ever since primary school has become free of charge, the number of students in Sirarou has doubled from one year to the next", reports school principal Adam Kpankpanma. He estimates that now around three of five children in his community start school. But a lot of persuading parents remains to be done so that particularly girls do not drop out again.



Alphabetisation is taught in a local language.

Budget supports strengthens education

In spite of all weaknesses: The educational system in Benin is on the move. Education has been declared to be an area of priority and its share in the 2007 government budget reached 19 percent. Benin disposes of well over 300 million dollars per year for the recurring and investment costs at all educational levels. While this seems a considerable share at first sight, it does amount to not even 1.5 percent of the public expenses which Switzerland makes for education. And this with Benin having two million inhabitants more than Switzerland, namely nine million. 44 percent of Benin's population are younger than 14 years – in Switzerland only 16 percent of the population fall into the same age group.

Switzerland supports Benin's state budget with almost 1,5 million dollars (1,7 mio CHF) and contributes to this progress together with seven other countries and institutions such as the World Bank. The com-

binated contributions of all donors amount to some 165 million dollars and equal around ten percent of the state's expenses. These contributions are tied to specific requirements in areas essential for poverty reduction. Apart from the educational system these include the health as well as the agricultural or legal system.

"Thanks to budget support Benin clearly disposes of more means for the educational system. The results are impressive: In 2007, for example, 66 of 100 enrolled primary students have finished their classes, for the girls alone the rate was at 56", says Joseph Akanhanzo-Glele donor coordinator and responsible for educational issues in the Danish cooperation agency (Danida). These numbers, however, fall behind the government's aims of 70 respectively 60. On the occasion of the annual budget support conference the representative of the educational sector cautioned against reducing the respective share in the budget, as a decrease in the quality of the teaching would be the consequence. Nationwide 48 primary school students come to one teacher. In 2007 for the first time 98 out of 100 children of the respective age group started school. Even if at the moment one third of them will drop out before they finish their fifth year, it is foreseeable that secondary school attendance will increase massively in the next years. In future, more resources will be needed also at that level.

"Hub for alphabetisation"

The provision of schooling for the younger generation is not the only challenge. Alphabetisation of adults is an equally burning issue: In Benin, 8 out of 10 people aged 15 to 49 are illiterate. Depending on the region the ratio is much higher. According to a research project (SILP project by the non-governmental organisation CERABE), only 15 adults (ten men and five women) out of 1500 know how to read and write in the village of Takou. Miss Toko N'Gobi Bio Gijiri from N'Dali has attended several alphabetisation classes supported by Switzerland. "Before, when I bought four bags of fertiliser from the supplies, they have charged me for five. Today, they cannot do

that anymore. Or if I drop off cotton, the delivery has to be marked. Because I did not know how to write my name, they charged me 40 cents (200 CFA) every time." There is also a new alphabetisation centre in the village. "Other women come and see me now and want help or some advice. Before, we were blind, now we can see!"

The state ordered an alphabetisation coordinator to be present in every community, but did not provide any money for activities, which is why they do everything but pass on reading and writing skills. The directorate for alphabetisation was not very bothered with that, as it used to belong to different ministries, for example the ministry of sport, where it remained a foreign body and fell victim to other interests. President Yayi Boni, newly elected in 2006, promoted the directorate to a new Ministry of Basic Education, Literacy, and National Languages where the population's reading and writing skills really stand at the core.

Switzerland has promoted the alphabetisation in certain regions, particularly for cotton farmers already for a long time. In 2004 the programme was redesigned jointly with the population and the official bodies in or-

der to really serve local development. In the department of Borgou-Alibori 421 new centres in 300 villages were established and in the first four years 18'000 adults were educated in the two important languages of the region – Peul und Baatonum. The new political will in favour of alphabetisation wants to use these experiences in the entire country for all 25 national languages. However, at the moment the resources are too scarce in order to facilitate alphabetisation in all national languages and to produce the necessary teaching materials. The government wanted to choose four languages but had to back out after protests from the population. The colonial memory of French being imposed by France resonates.

"We've suddenly become a hub for alphabetisation", describes Salomon Balogoun, the director of the organisation SIA N'SON which is implementing Switzerland's programme. "Our experience is demanded at the national level. As soon as she was in her position, the newly appointed alphabetisation minister came for an information visit. Some people who are in charge in the ministry have earned their spurs in the programme supported by Switzerland." In the



The campaign "Toutes les filles à l'école – all girls to school" is showing first effects, even though the aim is not reached yet.

context of the alphabetisation project Switzerland covered the costs for pedagogical material, the instructors' training and the construction of the facilities. Since 2008 each department in the country receives a little over 30'000 dollars (15 mio CFA) from

the national budget to cover recurring costs. In that way, general budget support and targeted alphabetisation project investments complement each other perfectly.



Alphabetisation for women in N'Dali.

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