
Benin: The rocky road of promoting women's rights

*Richard Gerster**

In 2008 Mariam Mallam Idi was the only woman who was elected into the 17 head municipal council of the community of N'Dali in the North of Benin. She gives thanks: "We women in politics are only where we are today because of the support from Switzerland." Her political career was not a walk in the park. The local self-help organisation FAABA which is supported by Switzerland was lobbying the traditional heads of the village for women's candidatures in the upcoming municipal elections. They invited Mariam Mallam Idi and interviewed her. Mariam herself also wanted time for reflection and wanted to talk everything over with her family. After a week she offered some cola fruit to the village head as a sign of her agreement. In this manner she ensured the wise men's support in the village. After that a campaign of several months followed. Not all were as lucky as Mariam Mallam Idi to be elected. Martine Saka, another candidate in N'Dali failed in spite of her efforts – party political intrigues were stronger than solidarity among women. She sees herself as an dedicated "development woman", and her disappointment can be felt when talking to her.

Education as a decisive factor

In the 2008 municipal elections there were 66 women among the 1435 people elected into the councils. That is 23 more compared to the first elections of six years earlier – a progress from 3.75 percent to 4.06 percent, albeit a modest one. In the community of Save, for example, Yacoubou Fatouma Ayedoun was the only woman to be elected into the municipal council in 2008. She considers encouraging parents to really send their girls to school to be one of her important tasks. "A better education for girls is the basis for the road to equal rights", she says. Benin's campaign for a better educational system (see separate article about education) supports this concern.

Girls' school attendance is increasing even if it still lags behind the boys'. Statistics show that in 2007 already 92 percent of all 6 to 11-year old girls start school. For the boys the rate amounts to 98 percent. However, many of the girls give up again soon afterwards. Only 56 percent finish five years of primary school. The proportion of girls is decreasing even more when it comes to secondary schooling. The breeding ground for the girls' dropout rates are namely an uncertain economic environment, where they are asked to provide additional income. Furthermore early marriages favour school dropouts.



Education is key for improving the position of women.

Incentives set by budget support

For several years now eight donors, among them Switzerland, have directly supported Benin's state budget. In return, the government has committed to reaching a number of specified requirements. In the educational sector the performance framework which the government has created for itself also includes gender specific indicators. One of them is the already mentioned rate of girls finishing their primary education. With the achieved quote of 56 percent the government has more than met its own requirement for 2007.



Am agony aunt mailbox at a secondary school for girls.

At the 2008 annual budget support conference government and donors jointly look back on achievements and failures. The family ministry which is in charge of promoting women's rights is taking stock of the crude facts. A national policy for gender equality is under preparation. But concrete results are "modest", resistance is considerable. Many decision makers have not yet adopted the idea of equal rights and coherence across the various areas of government activities is still lacking. Furthermore, human as well as financial resources are more than meagre. Indeed the share of the state budget which the family ministry has at its disposal amounts to a mere 0.09 percent. It is proposed to introduce gender specific planning and budgeting processes in one of the sectors ("gender budgeting").

Decentralisation as a vehicle for change

An important field of activities particularly for women is development at the local level and in a regional context. "Benin was colonised by France. The burden of centralisation still casts its long shadows. We have to declutter our heads", demands Omer Thomas of the non-governmental organisation CIDR. A small contribution is the alphabetisation campaign for adults which also addresses the advantages of self-determination at the level of the community. The chapter in the textbook dealing with community taxes shows that taxpayers are also entitled to services such as schools or roads. "Decentralisation needs to be strengthened. It makes people responsible for their own development. But the road for women is rocky and is in need

of support from a non-governmental organisation which is independent from any political party", says Germain Kora Sero, president of FAABA. Switzerland is supporting decentralisation in Benin through a variety of programmes and projects.

This is another context which links directly to budget support. The agreement between government and donors includes, among others, requirements concerning the state transfers to the 77 communities in the country. "I have always stood up for the inclusion of elements of local development (decentralisation, governance) into the framework for budget support", says Marcel Baglo, director general for decentralisation in the ministry of interior. Because anchoring such goals in the agreement between government and donors increases their political weight and obligation.

General budget support also generates additional income for Benin which the state can use for its most important projects, for example the newly created fund for the support of municipal development (FADEC). It is co-administered on equal terms by the state and the communities. "The allocation of freely useable contributions is based on criteria such as population numbers, surface area and poverty rates, but also performance indicators. That is how the fund will become an instrument for the efficient administration of the communities at the service of their population" says Marcel Baglo. The state will contribute some 10 million US dollars (5 bn CFA). Foreign donors have also announced contributions. "State subsidies for communities have been growing visibly from 1,8 million



Joining the discussion requires knowledge and often also courage.

dollars (900 mio CFA) in the first year (2003) to more than 11 million dollars (5,436 bn CFA) in 2008", says Omer Thomas of the non-governmental organisation CIDR. Marcel Baglo is convinced: "Budget support is a very effective instrument. Because we have 12 departments in the country. In four of them numerous donors are active and are arguing about the best projects. Other regions are neglected even though poverty is widespread. With budget support all of them are getting something."

The freely usable resources require responsible financial management. "Many of those who were successfully elected mayors in 2003 thought that they have become ministers and they were wasting their money", criticises Omer Thomas from CIDR. Some of them were public servants and have not learned to listen to the needs of the population. It is of little wonder that they got their due in the elections of 2008: Many of them did not run again in the first place and the people sent fourteen of the local dukes who were running for another term packing. However, this was not only about the individual profiles, but also about party politics. Even though local elections

do not necessarily follow party political patterns, the president and his associates tried to help their own candidates to make it. Critical voices do not shy back from the accusation of manipulated elections. Sadly the number of four female mayors was cut in half as a result of the 2008 elections. Promotion of gender equality requires some stamina.

Gender equality as a motor of development

Cultural backgrounds turn reaching the aim for anchoring the fundamental thought of gender equality in programmes across all ministries into a hurdle race. Benin's official growth and poverty reduction strategy contains an explicit reference with respect to the discrimination of women in its society. According to the strategy the promotion of women's rights should be achieved through improved education, better access to microcredits, legal equivalence, for example when it comes to owning land and real estate, economic support and by fighting domestic violence. Particularly the decentralisation process offers excellent opportunities for women to participate in political de-



In the community of Save, Yacoubou Fatouma Ayedoun was the only women the people elected into the municipal council.

cision making processes and in local economic development Gender equality is a motor of development.

Switzerland was no innocent bystander with respect to anchoring the promotion of women's rights in the poverty reduction strategy. Household surveys were conducted in the run-up to its elaboration in order to give a face to the type and extent of poverty. Switzerland insisted that the used methods addressed gender inequality. Since then, Switzerland supports the "Observatory for social change" as an accompanying measure to budget support. "Thanks to the support from Switzerland we can trace the implementation with detailed indicators which also show the position of men and women", says Ambroise C. Agbota, head of the observatory. This active

role is no coincidence, as gender equality has been a focus of Swiss development cooperation for a long time and has an effect on all programme areas, including budget support.



FAABA president with the elected and not elected municipal council candidates of N'Dali.



The road to equal opportunities for women and men is still long.

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