
Benin's long way to make progress measurable

*Richard Gerster**

“Here we have to sound the warning bell, that is a black spot in Benin’s democracy”, records a foreign aid worker in Benin. He comments the weak performance by the ministry of justice. One of the indicators shows a triple overcrowding of the prisons: Three prisoners have to share one space. Another indicator concerns the average duration of preventive custody. The goal was to reduce its long average duration of 14 months to six months. Instead it further increased to 17 months. In the same year, on the other hand, 466’000 people received access to clean drinking water. The government of Benin uses such precise indicators to measure problems and progress in the country across a variety of fields. Countries such as Switzerland support Benin in its various efforts, for example with direct co-financing of the state budget (“budget support”).



Making progress measurable: for example providing more people access to clean drinking water.

It goes without saying that budget support is no blank check but tied to conditions, as the government commits to reach jointly agreed goals. Until 2007 each donor marked its share of budget support with its own “scent”: The “joint” matrix was simply an accumulation of all donors’ conditions and only a few of the listed criteria were really shared. “That was very difficult for us

to manage and hardly possible to achieve”, says Bertin Aizonou of the ministry of finance. Under these conditions it comes as no surprise that Benin’s government rated conditionality simply as useless in an African-wide survey done by the Strategic Partnership with Africa (SPA). The donors concurred and after long negotiations a new framework contract for budget support was signed in December 2007. A new matrix (“Performance Assessment Framework, PAF”), shared by all parties, is an integrated element of this contract, but was not available at that time.

A new start

This matrix summarises the most important elements which Benin wants to advance in the next three years and which will be remunerated with contributions to the state budget. As they are elements of strategic importance, the matrix also serves as basis for the political dialogue between the government and the donors. If the targeted threshold values for the indicators are reached and the agreed measures are introduced, that means green light for the disbursement of budget support.

Aristide Fiacre Djossou of the ministry of finance is considered to be the father of Benin’s growth strategy for poverty reduction (“Stratégie de Croissance pour la Réduction de la Pauvreté, SCRP”) which also serves as basis for the selection of indicators. On March 27th 2008 the government organises an event during which the matrix is presented and discussed. The night before, only a very rough draft is available and a lot of empty squares characterise the matrix. It is really the government’s turn to present a proposal which ought to be the route forward and which will then be discussed with the cooperation donors. But the government hardly makes use of the chance to set the tone.



Taking girls' school attendance as a measure of success.

Who actually is the government? Rivalries between two ministries (ministry of finance and ministry of cooperation) blocked productive work for months, because at the management level both of them wanted to be responsible and at the lower levels nobody took on responsibility due to the unclear situation. A new decree of March 2008 declared the ministry of finance to be in the lead. The catalogue of criteria tracing the SCRP's implementation contains 200 indicators and is therefore very comprehensive. It seems that the selection for the budget support matrix was done in a somewhat accidental manner. Almost 50

people participate in the event and change and enlarge the draft. But it is still a long way to go until a concentrated strategic document is available. Discussions are about technical aspects while conceptual preliminary questions remain in the dark. These weaknesses are a consequence of fragmented structures and strict hierarchies.

PAF-workshop Benin

There are impressive engaged and sometimes even passionate discussions during the event. Representatives of numerous ministries such as the ones for health, education, justice or agriculture are present. The importance of indicators to measure one's own achievements as well as the importance of general budget support which is administered by the ministry of finance is obviously well understood. Other countries still have a long way to go in this respect. The representative of the family ministry announces to deliver an indicator from her area of responsibility at a later stage. This is most likely due to strategic reasons, but rather because the ministry also wants some visibility in this important matrix. The presence of specific know-how from vari-



Government and donors assess progress and problems in specific areas, such as the health sector ("Secteur Santé") The results are then integrated into the progress assessment of budget support.

ous domains is an advantage for the elaboration of meaningful indicators to measure Benin's progress. Because the identification of indicators is anything but a simple matter:

- In the domain for decentralisation for example, the actual budget transfers to the communities are proposed as an indicator. It turns out during the discussion that this data is not available but would have to be collected in all 77 communities. While this would be an important matter, it is too complex and the suggestion is therefore dropped.
- The proposal to use the exhaustion of the health budget as an indicator causes a stir among those present. They address the ministry of finance and confirm how interested they are in this information and that they absolutely want to see it as an indicator.
- In the educational sector the government proposes to use the numbers of girls starting school as an indicator of success. But everybody agrees that the number of girls finishing the first five years of school would be much more important. However, official data in this respect is not considered to be trustworthy. A further point of criticism is that progress is only measured at the primary level, while the secondary level and vocational training is not mentioned. A collaborator from the educational sector contradicts this: The list of indicators should be as short as possible and easy to meet.
- How can the stimulation of the private sector be expressed in an indicator? The government's proposals are not met with enthusiasm from the donors' side. Should the World Bank's annual analysis "Doing Business in..." serve as a basis? But this leaves out the entire informal economy which is of key importance for Benin. And what's more that would be an indicator which is not contained in the initial list of all SCRP indicators.

A proposal by Benin's administration on the last day of the event comes as a surprise, namely to not only assess the government's achievements, but to also include indicators in the matrix which look more closely at the donors' behaviour. Do they honour their commitments? Are the condi-

tions for aid transparent? Are missions organised jointly in order to reduce the time burden on the government? The basis for this are declarations which all donors have signed (Protocol d'accord, Paris Declaration). An intensive discussion ensues due to a proposal to title this paragraph as joint government and donor commitments. Benin clearly refuses, as the government's commitments are already described in detail in the previous paragraphs. But they show understanding for the donors' need to discuss the proposed indicators. Partnership also means more symmetry.



Economic improvements for the poor are not easy to measure, for example when selling local cheese.

Things move slowly

Two weeks after the seminar a summarising report from the lead government agency is presented. However, the annexe summarising the current status of the matrix is missing. The argument is that the indicators should first be discussed within the ministries in order to present a consolidated proposal. Rumours have it that the coordinating agency is snowed under with other work. On June 23rd 2008 president Yayi Boni invites all donors to political dialogue, which is foreseen by the budget support agreement of 2007 to take place regularly – even if not necessarily at the highest level. The minister of finance asserts that for 2008 almost 82 million US dollars (40,6 bn CFA) have been promised but that so far no donor has disbursed. The World Bank has also delayed disbursement of a credit (PRSC-4) because a privatisation condition in the cotton sector (SONAPRA) has not been met on time. But

above all, a matrix which has been accepted by all and is an integrated element of the contract does not yet exist. The draft is promised for mid-July.

In July, the government transmits a revised matrix of 28 indicators. However, the donors are not satisfied. A task force is appointed. It identifies six indicators to be useless, seven to be problematic and proposes 14 new ones. The proposals are forwarded to the mixed working groups of experts for education, health etc., in which both government and donors are represented. Apart from assessing the indicators' appropriateness they should also present values to be met in the years 2009 – 2011. "What the dialogue about indicators on the technical level is lacking, is back up from the very top", says an observer, "otherwise this tug of war about details instead of strategic issues would have been over a long time ago."

Annual budget support conference

In the meantime September 2008 has come. The annual budget support conference

offers a platform for government and donors to finally agree on a matrix. The meeting with this issue on its agenda cannot complain about lacking interest. 50 participants sit around a crowded table. The government representatives announce that the next annual budget support conference should take place in June and not only in September. In June the results can be integrated into the discussion about the state budget for the coming year – it is too late for that to happen at the end of September. However, this presupposes that the achievements of the past year are presented in numbers no later than April. After that, a summarising report can be elaborated in May. The representative of the health sector promises provisional numbers for April, which would have to be confirmed at a later stage. But the European Commission points out that according to contract only official and verifiable numbers are relevant. The conflict remains unsolved.

In many instances the mixed working groups have proposed other and additional indicators. In view of food security the agricultural group wants to include Benin's ratio



Switzerland has a very diverse programme in Benin: It namely supports decentralisation, alphabetisation and local economic development. Experiences from these areas in turn are an inspiration for its participation in budget support.

of self-sufficiency with respect to staple foods. An objection to that is that a crop failure due to bad weather could not be interpreted as an underachievement on behalf of the government. "We have to look at the background of all successes and failures anyway", argues Jan Vlaar. He is the donors' group coordinator and head of the Dutch international cooperation. Government representatives want to ensure that the indicators really are collected and that realistic goals are set for the coming years. The donors on their part speak up for meaningful indicators in the matrix. After the meeting a government representative expressed his astonishment at how many new indicators out of the SCRP were proposed by the donors, even against their

own declared intentions. The annual budget support conference ends on September 30th 2008 with the conclusion that the progress achieved in the past year was satisfactory but that room for improvement remains. But there is still no agreement with respect to the matrix.

Eureka – the matrix is here!

A few days after the end of the meeting the government transmits a revised version of the performance matrix to the donors and asks for their feedback. The donors react quickly: It is a good basis, but indicators for poverty and the environment are lacking and the measures and values to be achieved in the coming years are not complete yet. After a last round of talks the government finalises the matrix reaching until 2010 in December 2008. It consists of 35 indicators many of them including sub-indicators, like for example to provide numbers for schooling not only by year but also by sex. Attached to the matrix are six indicators which measure the donors' achievements and whether they fulfil their commitments. The process took twelve months. There are no winners or losers, but a shared basis for the continuation of budget support.



Construction of streets, financed by the "Budget National".

* The author, Dr. Richard Gerster, is an economist and works as independent consultant and publicist (www.gersterconsulting.ch). This article is part of a series commissioned by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) to take a closer look at budget support from various points of view. They reflect the author's personal opinion.