
Decentralisation in Burkina Faso: On the way to autonomy

Richard Gerster*

For a francophone and therefore centralistic country such as Burkina Faso the way to more autonomy for communities resembles a small revolution. It is said that a former minister once called decentralisation "suicide for the central government". Few talk about political resistance, but there is "fear of the new and unknown", as Leonard Guira, director general of the ministry of interior says. "The mayors will get the fridges in the health centres and give them to their wives!" was only one of the many apprehensions. But the political will supporting decentralisation has once more been confirmed by prime minister Teritus Zongo in June 2008, when he presented a plan of action for the next year's implementation at a national conference.



When selling cattle the fees are collected and signed for on the spot in the market.

A long way

The process of decentralisation started in 1995 with the creation of 33 urban municipalities and first local elections. In the year 2000 on the occasion of the second round of elections local autonomy was extended to 49 small cities. And in 2004 a network of some 302 additional rural municipalities was spread over the country. This was followed by the first country-wide elections in 2006: 17'976 municipal and regional coun-

cillors were elected – sometimes in contested fights. 6435 of the elected are women. The ruling party ("Congrès pour la Démocratie et le Progrès, CDP") which explicitly encouraged its sections to nominate women has to be thanked for this considerable proportion. The municipal councils elect a president from their midst.

The challenges on the rocky road to a functioning community and region are immense. Many elected individuals are lacking a basic understanding of a community's tasks as well as of their own role. Technical capacities needed for project planning and implementation hardly exist. More than four of the five community councillors do not know how to read or write. A programme specifically targeting the alphabetisation of the elected in their local languages and French has just started. The population has high expectations towards the elected who in turn are lacking not only know how but also financial resources. But awareness is growing: On July 3rd 2008, due to massive pressure from the population, the ministerial council has for the first time set down a mayor due to abuse of authority and incompetence.

Departure instead of upheaval

The state is in the process of making available tasks, competences and resources to the communities. Preschool and elementary school, health, youth, culture, sports and leisure time are primary fields of activity for the communities. "Decentralisation is an excellent thing, but it needs a gradual approach, not upheaval", says the mayor of Fada N'Gourma, Moumouni Kocty. Six primary schools in Fada's surroundings have been handed over to the city in 2007, the money for their operation and maintenance has yet to follow. The teachers remain employed by the state.



Cattle ownership is one source of income for the communities: 20 cents (100 CFA) per head and year.

The communities have received the competence to collect their own fees, for example for market booths or taxes for real estate or entertainment. This way, Fada N'Gourma has collected own resources of some 400'000 US dollars in 2007. Taxes are not popular. But they stimulate the insight that services from the community can only be expected if oneself is contributing. The gain is determined by the rules' enforcement as well as the local economic dynamic. In addition to their own revenue the communities receive subsidies from the state. "Contributions to our recurring costs

are decreasing. But in 2008 we received almost 60'000 dollars (30 mio CFA) in the form of untied funds for investments, while this amount used to be only some 12'000 dollars (6 mio CFA)", assesses Fada N'Gourma's mayor. The state has budgeted subsidies amounting to almost 250 million dollars (12,7 bn CFA) for all municipalities and regions nation-wide.

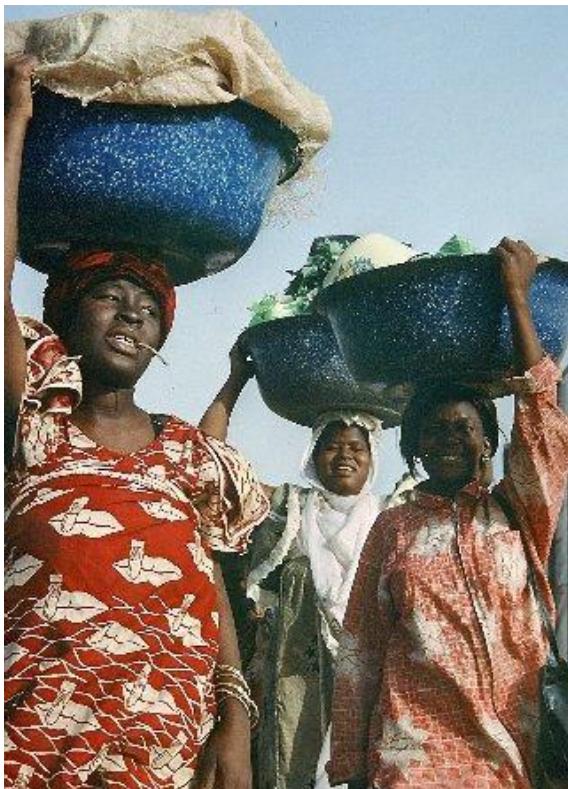
Switzerland has supported decentralisation in three small cities, among them Fada N'Gourma, from the beginning. The first generation of communities of 1995 is ahead of latecomers. Guy Dériaz who is involved in the implementation on behalf of the Swiss government makes the following assessment: "Fada N'Gourma has a dynamic and open mayor. It is them who are pushing ahead, not we." Also other donors such as the World Bank or Germany are supporting the decentralisation process with trainings, planning and investments in infrastructure. But parallel to strengthening communities the population also has to learn how to be a watchdog for the elected people.

Own revenues and financial transfers are not enough. The law foresees a permanent



Cultivating and selling one's own vegetables strengthens the local economy.

fund for investments by local governments (FPDCT) which is now in the process of being implemented. "The government is willing to augment the fund with annually growing contributions", says Leonard Guira. In 2008 for the first time ten million dollars (5 bn CFA) are foreseen. The advantage of the fund is that the communities themselves are equally represented, also when it comes to its administration. Furthermore the fund presents itself as an attractive opportunity to foreign donors who want to support the process of decentralisation.



Women on their way to the local market, early in the morning.

Budget support at the service of decentralisation

"Development cooperation which takes the form of projects is scattered and therefore creates new inequalities. Untied funds for the state budget ("budget support") on the other hand strengthen the authorities' responsibility, improve transparency and ensure that the government has to answer to critical questions from parliament", is Leonard Guira's conviction. "The three small cities of Fada N'Gourma, Ouahagouya and

Koudougou, for example, can rub their hands to have a project partner like Switzerland which in 2007 invested some 1,8 million dollars (900 mio CFA) for them. But of course I often hear voices from other small cities: 'Why them and not us?'"

In return for budget support the government and donors agree what specifically will be achieved in the respective year. This performance agreement ("matrix") contributes to the fact that decentralisation not only remains on paper. "The indicators in the budget support matrix are negotiated at the highest level. The fact that they include some points which relate to decentralisation supports our efforts", says Leonard Guira. The 2008 performance agreement foresees a precise minimal increase in the transfers from the national budget to the communities. Furthermore the creation and rules of the supporting fund are agreed upon in detail in the matrix. One of the employees of the ministry of finance considers the decentralisation criteria to be the heart of the matrix. Decentralisation has to pay off for the population. "Too much money gets caught in Ouagadougou, while only a few kilometres outside of the capital communities lack the most basic infrastructure", he says.

Decentralisation is not only a focus of the matrix, but also in the dialogue between the donors and the government. At the 2008 annual budget support conference the donors show concern with the weak implementations of the good intentions with respect to decentralisation. "At the end of 2007 not a single competence has been transferred to the rural communities", is the assessment in the Aide Mémoire. Furthermore the donors point out the relevance of alphabetisation and further education for the elected local bodies. Also, it would be important to tackle the local plans for development as well as their implementation in all local communities.

If financial resources are lacking, the population's expectations remain unmet, even if the local authorities have the best of intentions. Which is why Burkina Faso's association of municipalities (AMBF) not only calls for more competences and financial resources but also for more co-determi-

nation. The regions and communities should be addressed and included in the elaboration of the national budget. Even if the departure towards autonomy is paved with difficulties: "There is no way back. Decentralisation in Burkina Faso has taken roots", says Simon Compaoré, the head of the municipalities' association AMBF and popular mayor of Ouagadougou in a feisty mood while he knocks on the table. "We're elected by the population. No minister owes accountability to the population as directly as we do."



The management team of the municipalities' association AMBF with its head Simon Compaoré, mayor of Ouagadougou.



Rural access roads are a precondition for local development. Helvetas is engaged in the construction of village roads on behalf of the Swiss government.

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