
Corruption in Burkina Faso: Is there a wind of change?

*Richard Gerster**

Until the start of 2008 it was no rarity to also on weekends see official ministry cars in front of bars and restaurants. But now the wind has turned. Using official vehicles for private purposes is no longer considered a trivial offence, which is why vehicles with red license plates have disappeared from the weekend street scenery within a short time. According to surveys conducted by the private anti corruption agency Ren-Lac the customs authority is considered to be the leader among the most corrupt state bodies. Therefore the government has asked the Swiss company Cotecna to control external trade and has recently even enlarged their mandate. First successes are already visible: Income generated by duties has increased markedly in the second half of 2007 and 2008.



With a new authority the prime minister wants to strengthen the state's control.

New authority

The nomination of Tertius Zongo as prime minister in June 2007 has brought new drive to the fight against corruption. A political sign of this drive is the creation of a new top level authority which controls the state ("Autorité supérieure de contrôle d'Etat") and can directly refer cases to justice. It also has to publicly render account of its activities. "So far justice was a dark room. It was there at the latest where all

traces were lost, which is why transparency is so important", says a Bourkinbé. However, the new authority remains under the direct control of the prime minister which endangers its independence. What should not be forgotten either is the context of poverty and low levels of education which favour everyday corruption. In view of the educational system, for example, Ren-Lac wrote in its 2006 annual report: "People's poverty and the low level of teacher salaries are the main reasons, why many stakeholders in the educational sector are engaged in corrupt practices."

An analysis by the centre for democratic governance ("Centre pour la Gouvernance Démocratique, CGD") which was done in 2006 criticised the intransparency of the budget process: Neither the draft budget for parliament nor the audit report of the state budget were published. A follow-up study three years later (2009) showed that there were some efforts undertaken to improve the situation. In the international "open budget" ranking Burkina Faso improved its meagre 11 points of 2006 to 14 in 2008. However the approved budget is a document of over 1000 pages and will hardly be understood by non-specialists. For that reason civil society organisations such as the study centre CIFOEB ("Centre d'information, de formation et d'étude sur le budget") participate in the specific steps of the budget's elaboration and make independent analyses which they broadcast via newspapers, radio and television. CIFOEB's work is supported amongst others by Switzerland, because transparency and public debate in the context of the budget has a preventive effect on the abuse of public money.

Budget support as a chance

The steering and control mechanisms of public finances have been an important construction site in the cooperation be-



Street kitchen in Fada N'Gourma.

tween government and foreign donors. On the international level an instrument ("PEFA") has been developed which diagnoses strengths and weaknesses of public finances. The X-ray of Burkina Faso's finances showed a number of improvements as well as deficits for 2007, namely with respect to the mobilisation of own income (see separate article), financial control and public procurement. PEFA also confirmed that the 2008 budget corresponds to the priorities set by the fight against poverty and is in agreement with the medium-term financial plan. Corruption means that public money is disappearing in the wrong pockets. The better the control mechanisms function in the regular state household, the

more attractive separate project budgets appear to people who want to divert money. Specific projects are therefore as exposed to the risk of abuse as is budget support. It is no coincidence that the saying goes, if you want to enrich yourself, you have to be responsible for projects.

Above all, budget support offers the chance to conduct a far reaching dialogue with the government about abuse. "We are concerned with corruption in this country. How you fight it, is your responsibility, but we want to see results", is the unambiguous message by the donors which is repeated at all levels of the dialogue. At all levels means in the political dialogue with the prime minister, but also with the ministry of finance on the occasion of the annual budget support conference in the joint expert groups for public finance. "No other instrument of international cooperation offers comparable opportunities for discussion. The government itself proposed to include the improvement of Burkina Faso's ranking in Transparency International's corruption index as a criterion for disbursement. This is very courageous as the ranking depends on results", says Mariam Diop who is responsible for budget support in the Danish agency and currently coordinating all donors. In their 2008 Aide Mémoire the do-



At a school's parents' meeting the members demand accountability from the board: "Every year we pay fees, but nothing is being done and what's more the cash register is empty. We want clarity, today!"

nors write: "We congratulate the government to the attention it pays to the fight against corruption and how this is expressed in the matrix by Transparency International's indicator."

How Switzerland deals with corruption

Together with Denmark and the Netherlands, Switzerland supports Ren-Lac's activities with a multi-year contribution. The activities include the implementation of surveys, formulating proposals in the fight against corruption and advocating for changes by exerting pressure via the media (see separate interview). Each year, Ren-Lac publishes an unvarnished report about the situation of corruption in Burkina Faso. Furthermore, Switzerland is very active in governance issues in the context of the donors' budget support group. A core concern for this group is the way of working and results achieved by the new anti corruption authority.



An effective fight against corruption is hardly possible without a functioning judicial system.

Switzerland contributes well over 6 million US dollars (8 mio CHF) to general budget support in Burkina Faso. In 2008 a quarter of that could only be disbursed after the government had fulfilled the agreed conditions with respect to the fight against corruption. On one hand this meant that the 2007 annual report of the anti corruption authority had to be publicly accessible. On the other hand the government had to design the measures undertaken in the fight against corruption in a more coherent and effective manner. By setting up the top level body for the control of the state men-

tioned at the beginning the prime minister met this requirement.

Parliament as a controlling body

Parliament approves the budget, follows its implementation and passes the final accounts. "In the area of public finance the progress achieved in recent years is obvious", says François Zoundi of the finance ministry. "Budgeting as well as accounts are fully computerised. The discrepancies between the two have decreased significantly. Since 2005 parliament receives the previous year's accounts in September. In parallel they are examined by the audit court." Budgeting and accounts automatically include budget support which is accounted for separately in the proposal for general information.

Parliament's role has changed, as Soma Baro, the finance commission's president explains: "Since 2004 we send parliamentary delegations to the regions in order to examine the implementation status on site. In some instances schools (see interview with Alfred Sawadogo) or health centres were not built at all or only of very poor quality. It is not acceptable that enterprises are paid without delivering the commissioned services. With respect to the abuse of this money parliament has played its role, the government has been called to order and the responsible minister has been replaced. Since we confront the government with these facts, they control themselves better."

Lobbying for regulations in one's own interest is a particularly sensitive issue also in Burkina Faso. A member of the national parliament earns a around 1400 dollars (700'000 CFA) plus allowances per month. Parliament determines its salaries itself. "This would never pass a public vote, I'm sure of that", oracles a collaborator from the legislative branch towards the Swiss visitor, well aware of the way things are done in Switzerland. "Being a member or parliament is not attractive financially. In one's region of origin one is confronted with numerous expectations and commitments and if they are not met, one will not survive the next elections."

Budget support strengthens the role of parliament. Already today its members dispose of more information than they used to. However, “apart from the experts in the finance commission many other parliamentarians have not understood how budget support works. At least they know that it is no blank check, but that concrete results in key areas such as education and health are expected”, says a local expert. According to Jean-Marie Dabiré responsible for the European Union’s budget support the donors insist that parliament receives the annual budget as well as the annual poverty reduction report at the same time. However, so far they can hardly exert influence on the government’s programme and its operational implementation, as the PEFA report observes critically.



Closer to the citizens: Switzerland has supported the decentralisation of the ministry of finance.



Corruption is an additional burden for the poor in their daily fight to make ends meet for their families.

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