
Mali: Budget support at the service of small steps (of progress)

*Richard Gerster**

“Mangoes are growing abundantly in our region. We’re in the process of building access roads, setting up storage space and determining selling points so that our tasty fruits can reach the market. Sales to Algeria will bring cash to our people”, describes Kokozié Traoré, president of Sikasso’s regional assembly, the policy of small steps of progress. Sikasso is a region in the South of Mali, West Africa. Its area, almost twice the size of Switzerland, is populated mainly by farmers and cattle breeders. The Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) has been working in Sikasso for decades and today supports the extension of rural infrastructure, if at least one third of the costs is borne by the population, the municipalities, the district and the regional assembly itself.



Cotton is an important source of income for the population.

Partway decentralisation

As a former French colony, Mali is carrying a centralistic hereditary burden. Just as Paris for France was Bamako until recently the undisputed political and economic centre for Mali. The process of decentralisation started in 1999 with two aims: building up community structures and promoting local development. Remarkable progress has been achieved in respect to community democracy. Local elections in the 703 municipalities, 49 districts and 8 regions took

place for the first time in 1999 and again in 2004. In 2004 60 percent of the councils were replaced with new heads. “That is democracy, but it is also laborious, as the newly elected first have to be introduced to their tasks and possibilities”, says a Malian who is working in the field of political alphabetisation.

The way to local development, however, is tough. While the state has delegated its competencies in the areas of education and health as well as sanitation to the new decentralised structures, it has difficulties with the transfer of finances. The most important step in this direction so far has been setting up an agency for the financing of community investments (“Agence Nationale d’Investissement des Collectivités Territoriales, ANICT”). Namely the European Union, the Netherlands and Sweden are channelling their support for decentralisation through the ANICT. Jean-François Cavanna of the French Agency for Development (AFD) says: “The money is there, but what is missing in Mali are the mechanics for project implementation. There is a real lack of capacity. But there is also a lack of political will for pulling through with the reforms.” There is no doubt when it comes to the basic needs of the population. But all too often, their own initiative is sabotaged by bureaucracy.

In a memorandum for the attention of the president of Mali (2007), the association of municipalities (“Association des Municipalités du Mali, AMM”) is complaining about the lack of progress in decentralisation. Even projects in the education, health or sanitation sector financed by international donors are stuck in their practical implementation. In plain language: “There is strong resistance in the state bodies when it comes to the delegation of these programmes to the municipalities, referring to their supposedly lacking implementation capacities.” Switzerland is also supporting

decentralisation. The federal government has mandated the private organisation Helvetas with the direct cooperation at the level of municipalities.

“Central government is still not ready to distribute the available money to the regions. This makes our groundwork so much more complicated”, says Kokozié Traoré. However, money is not the only thing lacking. Personnel is equally scarce, as working outside of the capital is not popular in the administration. Working “in the bush” is damaging for one’s career. But Adama Sissouma, director for local authorities respectively decentralisation is optimistic: “If financial decisions are no longer taken in Bamako, personnel will also follow decentralisation.”

Sikasso’s regional assembly as a partner

In 2009 Sikasso’s population again elected its municipal representatives who in turn elected the 27 members of the regional assembly. From their midst those people then nominated the president and two vice presidents who conduct business on a full-time basis. During one year, the regional assembly is expected to hold at least four



Sikasso’s regional assembly with its management team.

sessions which are open to the public by law. So far, however, only the members have been invited and informed. The regional assembly as well has to undertake steps to become more transparent and towards its citizens.

Within a few years the regional assembly has established itself as mediating interface which is adjusting the ministries’ services to the needs of the population. A programme for the region’s economic, social and cultural development until 2010 has been elaborated. Not only the production and marketing of mangoes but also that of potatoes has been organised and clarifica-



The village school in Pimperna which has been constructed by the population itself is in bad shape: improving the number and quality of the classrooms as well as the are among the community’s priorities.

tions for maize and meat are under way. Improvements in schools and medical services are undertaken in cooperation with the districts and communities. If the population becomes active in the context of joint planning it can count on the regional assembly's support.

Some 15'000 people from five villages and neighbourhoods, for example, have taken the initiative to set up a health centre. They have founded an association and financed 10 percent of the costs with their own money. The city of Sikasso on its part has provided the large and costly piece of land. The state is equipping the centre and supplies staff. The association itself has employed further people in order to enable a smooth running of the centre, which fulfils urgent needs: Most children from the initiating villages and neighbourhoods in Sikasso are now vaccinated against tuberculosis, yellow fever, German measles etc. Each day some 30 people come for medical advice and obtain medication. Statistics count around 40 births each month. If for once someone can not pay the supporting association steps in and covers the costs. In spite of impressive self-help the director of the health station which opened in Sikasso in 2005 laughingly admits: "We would not have a health centre today if it were not for Switzerland's support."

Budget support: "We are all in the same boat"

As unsatisfying as the current situation at the grass roots level often is, on the long term there is no alternative to making the Malian government an efficient provider of services for its population. This is the goal of the African Development Bank, the World Bank, the European Union, the Netherlands and Sweden when they jointly contribute some 160 million US dollars (2006) of general budget support for Mali. This amounts to roughly 10 percent of all public expenses. In addition to that around half of this amount is contributed to the educational and health sector in the form of specifically allocated funds. Until now, Switzerland has not participated in budget support, as it judges direct cooperation with the population to be more promising.

"Corruption in Mali remains at a very high level. The budget support donors have to pay attention in order not to not close their eyes to reality and not to become silent accomplices of those in power", says, Bakary Doumba, president of FECONG, an umbrella organisation for non-governmental organisations in Mali. And he adds: "We are not against budget support. Theoretically, it makes sense. But we are asking ourselves some questions: Is it really useful



The health centre in Sanoubougou could only be established thanks to the population's own initiative and organisation.

for the poor? What is the role for non-governmental organisations? In today's form, budget support is strengthening the central administration through the ministry of finance. While a deconcentration of various agencies is in place, it only includes tasks, but not finances and personnel. With real decentralisation the people in Bamako are losing power and influence, which is why decentralisation is thwarted."

But budget support has positive sides also in the difficult context of Mali. Adama Sissouma identifies a better dialogue between ministries: "We rarely used to talk about practical issues to specific ministries, for example the ministry of health. The catalogue of criteria which has to be met with regard to general budget support, draws us closer together. We are now talking more to each other. We are all in the same boat." Alassane Diabaté of the International Monetary Fund has a positive attitude towards budget support. "It improves transparency in the public sector and pushes harmonisation between donors. Decisive is, however, that budget support does not discourage the mobilisation of Mali's own income."

Can Sikasso be a model?

As mentioned at the beginning, Switzerland has been cooperating with the region of Sikasso since the beginning. Since 2007 new modes of cooperation resembling regional budget support have developed out of this history. Based on a regional development plan the Swiss contribution is paid directly into the regional assembly's account with the treasurer. As of late, France is also directly supporting the region of Sikasso, just like Switzerland. In doing so, France is complementing its cooperation portfolio which includes budget support at the national level. Jean-François Cavanna sees Sikasso's budget contribution as a possibility of strengthening implementing structures close to the grass roots. "If we are asking for money in Paris and it is not used, this asks for an explanation. Regional budget support is one possibility of putting things right."

The possibilities in Sikasso are promising. Adama Sissouma: "Sikasso has inspired us at the national level. Analysing the region's strengths together with the support for agriculture, the cooperation amongst the municipalities or the insight that urban centres depend on the rural back country – all these are experiences from Sikasso which can also be implemented in other regions of the country." Also non-governmental organisations are judging the Sikasso experience in a positive manner says Bakary Doumba. It is important to strengthen decentralised bodies. The future lies with regional budget support. Strengthening the local production of mangoes, cotton etc. in Sikasso is a good example for that."



The independent controlling body "Vérificateur Général" is the highest anti-corruption authority in the country.

"The best would be to keep only one set of accounts which would be accepted by all donors. We do not have enough staff and to keep several accounts and providing various reports is costly", says Kokozié Traoré. And he continues: "Currently we have three contracts with Switzerland. This makes cooperation unnecessarily complicated. All Swiss contributions should be put together." Furthermore, one year contracts are extremely short. Kader Dicko who is responsible for decentralisation activities at the Swiss Cooperation office in the capital Bamako comments this statement: "Today, we are prisoners of our own system. Instead we have to optimise and simplify our instruments, depending on the partner and region."

The way to real regional budget support is therefore still to be established, both on the donors' side and the side of the regions in

Mali. “Everybody still has military images in their heads where the commander determines the way to go and the village obeys. The change towards democracy takes time, a new generation. Real democracy is more than elections. Development takes

place in our heads, it is about more than providing infrastructure”, summarises Bou-bacar S. Dicko his rich cooperation experience. He coordinates Switzerland’s support in Sikasso and knows what he is talking about.



Advancing rural electrification is one of the state’s key tasks.

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