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## “In Africa’s Swiss neighbourhood”

*Chabi Bah Guera, Mayor, Municipality of N’Dali, Benin,  
is talking to Richard Gerster\**

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*R.G.: In the 2008 elections in the 77 municipalities of Benin only two of the mayors have been re-elected. 14 were not confirmed and some have decided not to run for office again – how come?*

C.B.G.: First of all: Welcome home! Our municipality N’Dali owes so much to Switzerland that I call it „Africa’s Swiss neighbourhood“. It was the Swiss who for the first time documented the alphabet of our local language Bariba. Contributions to the support of our health or educational system are further examples. But now to your question: There are two reasons for the earthquake of the municipal elections. On the one hand the party political wind has turned at the national level which also has local impacts. But various politicians have also suffered a personal loss of trust and have now received what they deserved. Out of the 17 members of N’Dali’s municipal council there are also 13 new faces.

*Being a former French colony, Benin is weighed down with a centralistic legacy,*



*Chabi Bah Guera has grown up in N’Dali, Benin, a stronghold of Swiss development cooperation. He has very fond memories of playing with children of Swiss experts in his youth. After school he studied electrical engineering in Poland. After his return he started a training scheme in electronics. During the first municipal elections in Benin in 2003 he was elected into the municipal council. At the end of 2006 he succeeded the outgoing president. In the second elections of 2008 he was confirmed in this function.*

*which is why the first municipal elections of 2003 held such historic significance. How has the situation changed since then?*

The last five years were a time of apprenticeship for all of us. 80 percent of our people are illiterate. The population first needed to be taught what it is all about. Everybody is demanding something from the municipality, without realising that this also means paying taxes and fees. This process of learning is far from being finished. 2008 was also the first time that a woman was elected into our council. This is also due to Switzerland which enabled local organisations to mobilise women. However, much remains to be done in this respect as, traditionally, in uncertain times daughters stay at home and help their families while sons continue with their schooling.

*What are N’Dali’s future big challenges?*

There are 72’000 inhabitants and with 3748 km<sup>2</sup> this is the second largest municipality in Benin. N’Dali depends on agriculture. Corn is the dominant product, after a heavy drop in the production of cotton (from 25’000 tons to 2000 tons). In the future, the farmers will have to organise the cultivation jointly, and, if possible, conserve the products and refine and market them. We also grow a lot of fruit, namely mangoes. As people are our most important resource, education is a priority – not least of all for the girls. Some of our six year old children need one hour to get to school. At the primary level one teacher has up to 80 students in his classroom, even though 30 are the average. We need better infrastructure and personnel. The health system and rural access roads are faced with a similar situation.

*As you know Switzerland is not only supporting specific projects but together with other donors is also contributing directly to Benin’s state budget. Being some 500 km away from the capital, do you feel any of its effects in N’Dali?*

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Kindergarten and primary school and attendance have been free of cost since 2006, but the parents still have to come up for the costs of school material and uniforms. The state covers the expenses for personnel and facilities, but on the long term the responsibility should be delegated to the communities. In N'Dali various schools have been established with help from abroad. Since 2006 almost all children attend primary school. Going to school for free is very important for us and would not be possible without additional state financing. A fund for the support for communal development (FADEC) is under preparation. We would like things to move fast. The state also needs more resources in this case.

*The needs are large. What resources are at your disposal and, above all, how can N'Dali mobilise its own financial income?*

We are collecting fees for booths at the market, for selling cattle or for public performances. Those are small contributions. Property tax, to which we are entitled, are directly collected in the department's capital Parakou and then partially forwarded to us. Sometimes the gendarmerie is needed

in order to collect these taxes from people who do not want to pay! The income is fluctuating considerably and amounted to 148'000 US dollars (74 mio CFA) in 2007. A large share of this came from a single road construction company which will move away again after finishing its work. In 2004 the self generated revenues only amounted to some 24'000 dollars (12 mio CFA). The subsidies provided by the state increased from 50'000 dollars (25 mio CFA) in 2004 to 130'000 dollars (65 mio CFA) in 2007. We receive international contributions for projects of approximately the same volume.

*Nobody likes to pay taxes. How do you explain to a destitute citizen why (s)he should pay taxes to the commune?*

Taxes are the citizen's contribution to development. For example, the commune repairs and maintains wells in the villages. If possible they are equipped with manual pumps and covered up in order to prevent pollution. If the people see benefits, they will also pay taxes. By the way: N'Dali would be happy to establish a partnership with a Swiss city, so we could learn together.

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