
“The budget is a country’s lifeline”

*Epiphane Quenum, Member of Parliament in Benin,
is talking to Richard Gerster**

R.G.: You are considered to be a distinguished critic of both, Benin’s former government under President Mathieu Kerekou, but also since the elections of 2006. What is going wrong?

E.Q.: The strategy of the current government focuses on economic growth and poverty reduction and is pointing into the right direction. It strengthens our agricultural production, animal husbandry, fishery as well as tourism. By doing so it creates employment and income for the population, while the former government depended too much on foreign aid and neglected developing the country’s own resources. We have to strengthen our own production. Progress in schools and in the health system accompany this process.

So everything is going well?

Unfortunately not. We have a managerial problem. The government functions practically autonomous and is bypassing parliament. While President Yayi Boni does not siphon off money for personal use, he decides about new projects in an autocratic manner and over the head of parliament.



Epiphane Possy Berry Quenum is an engineer in agro-sociology. Eight years ago he was elected into the national assembly as one of 83 representatives. He was confirmed in the 2007 elections. In Benin’s multi-party system his party “Renaissance du Bénin” holds 10 seats and plays the role of the opposition party. He is the chair of the planning commission. Furthermore he is an active member of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU).

The poverty reduction strategy is a wonderful thing. But the gap between it and reality is too large. Parliament is not fulfilling its role of an actively participating and controlling authority, even though we have to sanction the budget and control the implementing ministries. Parliament behaves like a beggar towards the government and how should a beneficiary control the donor? Furthermore, the government is actively withholding information. Our democracy stands at the beginning. It is lacking professionalism in parliament, we are beginners across the board.

What are the reasons for parliament’s weakness?

On the one hand we are not at all involved in the preparation of the state budget, which is why it is difficult to judge the vigour of the arguments and the foundations of the budget. On the other hand parliament’s capacities are completely inadequate. There are only five people available to support all members and parties, only one of them being a financial expert. Furthermore the time span to form one’s opinion is too short. Theoretically the government should present the proposal for the budget to parliament at the beginning of October so the new budget can come into effect on January 1st of the new year. The government consciously shortens parliament’s consultation time so that in reality we only have about 45 days in order to read documents containing more than 25’000 pages... The budget is not just any submission, but is about our country’s future, one of our society’s lifelines. Under present circumstances, however, the budget remains a blank check to the government.

As I can see, you have placed numerous post-it notes with hand written notes across hundreds of pages. Are all members of parliament working in such a thorough manner? Does your work in parliament have an impact at all?

Being the chair of the planning commission it is possible to exert some influence. The budget is not only a matter of money, meaning how much the ride costs, but as much a matter of the direction the ride takes. I have complained that specific goals and indicators are needed in order for the government's work to be assessed. We need such a catalogue of criteria as much as it is demanded by the international donors which co-finance the state budget. In response to my proposal training courses are now held for officials to inform them about the requirements such indicators need to meet. Or I have demanded accountability with respect to the amount of money that the government really has forwarded to the municipalities in the last years. Because in spite of the corresponding budgets they have complained that they did not receive any money.

However, sadly it is not a given that parliament is looking thoroughly into the different matters. Parties do not choose their favourite candidates according to their abilities, but rather according to their popularity. Out of the 83 representatives maybe 20 are capable of understanding a submission like the budget. Above all it needs a good mind to read, time to make enquiries and then the courage to ask questions or bring forward motions.



Epiphano Possy Berry Quenum, member of parliament, holds a key role as president of the planning commission.

What should be done in order to enhance the role of parliament? Can international cooperation contribute to that effect?

International donors should insist on parliament being integrated into the dialogue relating to budget support in an adequate form. We are, for example, also interested in the conditions of aid, in its conditionality. A share of the foreign contributions should furthermore be allocated to the representatives' training and to building up a parliamentary infrastructure. If the budget support donors are serious about aid effectiveness, they can not only support the executive, but need to include parliament as well.

* The author, Dr. Richard Gerster, is an economist and works as independent consultant and publicist (www.gersterconsulting.ch). This interview 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.