
Burkina Faso is fighting corruption: “We want deeds instead of words”

*Representatives of REN-LAC, the national network in the fight against corruption in Burkina Faso, are talking to Richard Gerster**

R.G.: In Transparency International’s 2007 annual report about worldwide corruption Burkina Faso is occupying rank 105 out of 179. The classification has deteriorated since 2005. The index of 2.9 points signifies that corruption is considered to be proliferating – what is going wrong?

Ren-Lac: One cause for worry is indeed the fact that corruption has developed from isolated cases to a systematic phenomenon. It has become endemic in Burkina Faso, the country of “integer people”. According to surveys, customs is considered to be the most corrupt authority, followed by the tax authority. To be part of the system means that favouritism might take place with the small employee, but that he is sharing his illegal income with his boss. If the employee is being prosecuted he can count on his boss’ backing. The placing of personnel is already happening under consideration of additional income. Even the leader of the anti corruption authority Alphonse M. Traoré himself has described the situation to be “alarming”.



Ren-Lac is a national network of 30 non-governmental organisations in Burkina Faso which have taken on corruption together since 1997. The two interview partners are: Claude Wetta, who is vice executive secretary of Ren-Lac besides working for the umbrella organisation of the unions (CGTB); and Yemdaogo Nikiema who is a full time programme leader at Ren-Lac.

Can you give us some concrete examples?

So far we have only caught small fish, because justice fails – it ranks third on the list of corrupt authorities. But it is known, for example, that billions of dollars have been rerouted from the national social security pool. The government has audited the books, replaced the director general and placed him somewhere else, but he was not prosecuted. A telling symptom is the fact that 12 out of the 19 billionaires in Burkina Faso are public servants. It conveys the message that it is not worth starting an enterprise, one should rather be employed by the government. That has to change.

Fighting corruption obviously means taking on powerful interests, it also means criticising the government. How can Ren-Lac be independent at all?

Ren-Lac is a broad based network with 30 member organisations from the scene of non-governmental organisations. We are well anchored in Burkina Faso and do not receive any money from the government. Rather it is our organisations who pay membership fees and many of them do voluntary work. In addition to this engagement, the Netherlands, Denmark and Switzerland jointly finance Ren-Lac’s strategic plan for 2008 – 2012. The contribution of just over one million US dollars (490 mio CFA) covers two thirds of its total costs. This is the basis on which we can build professionally and remain independent of the government.

Premier Tertius Zongo, who took up office in 2007, declared the fight against corruption to be one of his priorities. Is there a wind of change?

We are at the crossroads. With the new prime minister Tertius Zongo there is reason for hope. The government has created a high level authority to control the state (“Autorité supérieure de contrôle d’Etat”),

which can refer cases directly to justice. It is also accountable to the public. This is progress. However, the authority remains under the control of the prime minister. There is no participation from the side of civil society. Functionaries control functionaries. But at the end of the day it is the deeds, not the words which are of interest. This is what we are waiting for.

Various donors, among them Switzerland, are cofinancing the state budget via general budget support. They are not blind towards corruption, on the contrary. Budget support also creates new possibilities for the exertion of influence. Do you see any value added in this form of cooperation?

Due to our experiences we are of course doubtful whether public money is always used effectively. On the other hand, all possibilities for improvement have to be exhausted. We do see a value added in budget support, if the foreign donors are really observant. It needs money and mechanisms of control. Fighting corruption is a minefield and hard, back-breaking work, no walk in the park. Alliances among integer powers in the government, civil society and international donors are in demand and promising indeed. A precondition is and remains, however, political will at the highest level.

The performance agreement between the government and the donors foresees concrete measures and indicators of progress in the fight against corruption. The government has proposed itself to aim for an improvement of Transparency International's assessment as an indicator for success.

Ren-Lac has been invited to working meetings for the elaboration of these criteria. There was initial civil society participation. But it needs to be enlarged. Among the donors, Switzerland contributed significantly in this respect.

In what direction are you heading? How could the fight against corruption be made more effective?

The newly create anti-corruption authority is under the control of the prime minister. In Mali, for example, this body is completely independent from the government, its president has a civil society background, it has investigative competencies and publishes its annual report. It is also important, on a very general level, to strengthen independent voices in civil society and the media in order to build up countervailing power. That is how the name of a newspaper close to the government, namely "Sidwaya", will become reality. Sidwaya, a word from the local More language, means "The truth is on the table".



* 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.