

LOCAL PUBLIC GOVERNANCE IN WESTERN AFRICA: DEVELOPING THE COUNTRIES FROM THE GRASS-ROOTS UP

In western Africa, the problems linked to food security are very often attributed to the capriciousness of the climate and to meteorological factors. Even if the decline in the amount of rain and the phenomenon of global warming do indeed severely impact the situation of the men, women, and children, the recurring food crises in the Sahel region are also to be explained by human factors, factors which are often attributed with playing a merely secondary role. And yet, the armed conflicts, the poor governance of agricultural land, the limited resources of farmers and livestock-breeders confronted with strong population growth, the lack of infrastructure to meet the basic needs of the populations living in the cities, villages, and rural areas: all of these are indeed factors that imperil the living conditions of the region's inhabitants.

Despite the fact that significant efforts are being deployed in the capitals of the Sahel countries to maintain a certain quality of life, the situation is quite different in the communities situated in peripheral areas. In fact, one finds a flagrant imbalance in the distribution of resources and wealth, often leading to difficult living conditions in rural zones. However, it is precisely in these areas that the majority of west-African populations reside. Why then is there such a marked imbalance? The answer lies in the highly centralised structure of these countries. To a certain degree a result of the colonial past, the upshot is that public affairs have for a long time been managed and administered from the centre.

Beginning in the 1990s, the west-African States began a process of decentralisation to attribute increased competencies

to the local authorities. This process led in particular to the organisation of the first communal elections in Burkina Faso (1995), in Mali (1999), and somewhat later in Benin (2002) and in Niger (2004). Henceforth, the mayors and other local authorities have become involved in the management of public affairs.

Notwithstanding these reforms, several problems have emerged in practice. In the first place, the local authorities do not have enough funds at their disposal to fully assume their responsibilities. Furthermore, they have no long-term experience to draw upon in conducting communal affairs. Oftentimes, they lack the necessary competencies, hence the ensuing difficulties or even outright failure in implementing their mandates. And in a context as fragile as that of the Sahel region, any such obstacles to the good governance of communes can be heavy with consequences for the resident populations. This is particularly the case during periods of drought. Therefore the challenge is to better equip these areas of population both on the level of management tools and that of capacities.

With respect to the management of local affairs, Switzerland is often presented as a model. Taking advantage of this long tradition and the resulting know-how, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) is providing both technical and financial support to Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger in the process of strengthening local communes. This support has made it possible for cities and villages to better take care of themselves, to engage in a social and political dialogue with the population, and to galvanize a new socio-economic impetus. This Brief describes 4 projects on local public governance that are supported by the SDC in its 4 priority countries of western Africa.



The busy Sunday market of Fada N'Gourma.

THE ROLE OF THE MARKET IN LOCAL PUBLIC MANAGEMENT: THE CASE OF FADA N'GOURMA

An endless variety of spices, traditional multi-coloured clothing and vegetable oil of abundant virtues, all beneath the shade of the arcades, which shelter customers from the blistering heat of the sun. At first glance, the decor resembles that of any bazaar in North Africa or the Middle East. However, the scene is actually in an average-sized town right in the middle of the Sahel, specifically Fada N'gourma in Burkina Faso.

The marketplace was built thanks to a partnership between the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) and the Burkinabè Government to support the town of Fada N'gourma. This partnership, which began in 1997, served as the basis for a local development project to build merchant stands. Inaugurated in 2001, the Fada N'gourma Central Market has become an important source of income for the town, and is a major trading point for the whole of eastern Burkina Faso.

CORRELATION BETWEEN THE MARKET AND DEVELOPMENT

In a region where most activities revolve around agriculture, rural inhabitants need to be able to sell and distribute their products. By bringing producers and customers together, the central market serves as a vital outlet for agricultural production in the region. The sales generated here are a precious source of income for many rural dwellers and their families. This income enables them to continue working the soil and tending livestock while providing the town's inhabitants with locally produced food. Given the harsh and unpredictable climatic conditions to which Sahel countries are exposed, food security in the region is directly dependant on a high level of productivity in rural areas. This is why it is important for rural inhabitants, cattle breeders and farmers to be part of the value chain of economic activity. And here, the central market plays an essential role.

The central market is a major source of employment in Fada N'gourma: 1,311 merchants (341 of whom are women) currently work there. Each year, the market generates a turnover of roughly CHF 160,000 a year, which amounts to around CHF 50,000 in municipal tax revenues.

The market therefore makes a substantial contribution to the town's budget.

SALIENT FEATURES OF THE FADA N'GOURMA MARKET

Although Fada N'gourma's central market stands out from the other markets in the region, not least because of its size and economic potential, the SDC's ingeniousness is not limited to the physical construction itself. Indeed, such markets have been an integral part of the Burkina-bé landscape for a very long time. What makes the market at Fada N'gourma different is the way in which it is run. The management board is comprised of representatives of the local town hall, merchants and trade unions. Local public management takes the form of regular management board meetings where the various stakeholders discuss how the market is to be run.

What makes Fada N'gourma truly unique, however, is the way in which market income is used. Essentially, the profits generated from sales are directly reinvested in community projects. This ingenious system is based on a simple principle: merchants pay a monthly rental fee to use market stalls. A portion of this rental income is used to pay off the market's construction costs and maintain the site (repairs, cleaning, etc.). Some of this rental income is also used to cover the town hall's operating costs. The remainder is put into the Communal Development Support Fund (FADEC) and is used to finance projects that directly address the needs of local inhabitants. In Fada N'gourma, the FADEC has been used for four major socioeconomic and community projects:

- Laying over 3 km of municipal roads;
- Building a school for six classes;
- Building houses in a local village,
- Building a parking area for commercial vehicles.

By investing in markets, the SDC has empowered the local authorities in Fada N'gourma to direct their town's development and enjoy greater autonomy. The resulting local public management is particularly beneficial to local inhabitants since they are able to use services that meet their actual needs.

WOMEN IN THE RUNNING OF LOCAL AFFAIRS: EXAMPLE OF BENIN

For the SDC, reducing gender inequalities is an important element of the fight against poverty. The SDC aims to involve men and women on an equal basis in the management of public and domestic affairs to enable both sexes to benefit from development. Local bodies offer interesting examples of the involvement of women in public affairs.

In Benin, the participation of women in political life is still weak. This is the case in large parts of Africa and is illustrated by the small number of women occupying positions of responsibility in public institutions. For some years however, there have been some encouraging signs of a growing desire by women in Benin to work in the service of their fellow citizens. The results of the latest municipal elections, in 2008, provide proof of this: 66 women succeeded in being elected to municipal councils throughout the country in comparison with 45 in 2003. Even if this increase is not insignificant, it must be kept in mind that the level of representation of women in these bodies is growing only slowly (from 3.75% in 2003 to 4.64% in 2008).

Nevertheless, the simple fact of occupying a seat in one these institutions is not necessarily enough to enable these newly elected representatives to exercise an influence on political projects. They also have to be adequately equipped to carry out their mandates. Although the large majority of these women decided to get involved in political life to contribute to the development of their communities and to counter the prejudices held against them, most of them also consider that they do not have the tools they need to exercise their new responsibilities.

Aware of the gap between the will and the ability to act, the SDC has developed a strategy of accompanying women municipal councillors in Benin as an integral part of ASGOL (Appui Suisse au renforcement de la Gouvernance Locale / Swiss support for strengthening local government). The strategy aims to strengthen the capacities of elected women to carry out their roles and responsibilities more effectively and efficiently. Following consultations to identify their specific needs, the SDC set up a training plan for newly

elected women to rectify their shortcomings. A total of 23 training modules were organised, specifically in developing writing and rhetorical skills, the rights and duties of women, managing the municipal budget, developing micro-projects and their follow-up, the code of public markets and the application texts, development planning, etc.

The results of the support for women municipal councillors in Benin are promising, especially in the municipalities of the department of Borgou (a priority region of SDC action in Benin). This department, which is situated in the east of the country, has the largest number of elected women officials in the country (16 of the 66 municipal councillors in Benin come from there). With the SDC's technical and financial support, elected women officials in Benin, together with their homologues in two other departments (20 elected women officials in all) have carried out 15 micro-projects that contributed to raising the incomes of 372 woman members of woman village groups active in market garden production and the transformation of agricultural products. These projects also began with the promotion of schooling for children, including girls. In rural and disadvantaged areas, 967 nursery school children were able to benefit from educational games and equipment, and young girls who worked well were rewarded for their good results. Through these small projects, which often generate income for women and thus have a direct impact on alleviating poverty, elected women officials were able to assert their leadership roles and credibility.

Even though there is still much to be done to achieve better representation of women in political bodies, these women municipal councillors in Benin have shown a desire to participate actively in the development of their communities and a strong interest in public affairs. With a rapidly growing population and very high birth rates, the participation of women in decision-making bodies and their political influence can certainly play a decisive role in development activities and in improving the living conditions of all women in Benin.



The SDC support to elected women meets a genuine political will to take part to the local political affairs.

LOCAL PUBLIC MANAGEMENT AND DRINKING WATER: THE CASE OF NIGER

In Niger, the economy is mainly rural-based, contributing 52% to the country's gross domestic product. Moreover, rural dwellers account for 82% of the total population. These figures indicate that a very large majority of Nigeriens live in small or medium-sized communities. Unfortunately, not all settlements have adequate infrastructure to meet the needs of local inhabitants. The management and distribution of drinking water is an example of this.

Although Nigerien local authorities play an important role in managing drinking water supplies, the lack of technical and financial resources hampers their efforts to build the necessary infrastructure. In rural areas, only 48% of drinking water needs are covered, as opposed to the official 100% coverage rate in urban areas. This flagrant disparity explains the difficulties that local authorities have encountered in their attempts to improve basic rural services. However, limited access to water can have dramatic consequences, especially in a country such as Niger, which periodically experiences drought, waterborne diseases and a lack of food security.

Aware of the risks posed by this situation, the Swiss Agency for Development and

Cooperation (SDC) has devoted considerable resources to rural hydraulics in Niger, especially around Gaya and in the regions of Maradi and Tillabéri. The SDC has been running programmes of this sort since 1979. In the year 2000, the SDC adopted a new approach to local development, using two complementary instruments: the Local Investment Support Fund (LISF) and the Local Governance Support Programme (LGSP). The LISF provides local authorities with the funding needed to make public goods available, in particular water infrastructure. The LGSP helps authorities to manage these public goods. These two instruments are applied through a well-developed procedure. Communities make their needs known to the local mayor, who discusses the matter with the town council before applying for funding from the LSIF. Approved requests give rise to a call for tenders and a contract is signed with the company that makes the best offer. The mayor and LSIF administrators then ensure supervision of the commissioned project. While this process might seem straightforward, it is important to remember that the country does not have extensive experience with local public management (see box).

Over the past 10 years, the SDC has used this approach with 396 water projects, which have provided around 157,000 people with access to water for drinking and sanitation. Starting in 2012, LISF funding will be used exclusively for rural hydraulics. Between now and 2015, 75,000 more

people should enjoy the benefits of these services. By delegating the management of water infrastructure to the local authorities, the SDC enables them to play an important role in running their local affairs, especially with regard to such a precious resource as water. The resulting installations should also encourage citizens (including women) and elected officials to discuss everyone's needs and how these needs can be met. The participation of local inhabitants also serves to raise awareness of the importance of water conservation and sanitation. In times of drought, the importance of the techniques and knowledge acquired become immediately apparent. At the same time, the local authorities become better equipped to deal with the effects of unpredictable rainfall patterns.

SMALL COMMUNITIES BUT MAJOR CHALLENGES FOR ELECTED OFFICIALS

In Niger, local elections are a recent phenomenon, having only started in 2004. Close to citizens, elected mayors enjoy greater legitimacy and are better placed to identify problems in their community. However, in a country where basic public services have always been managed by civil servants in the capital, local authorities are not always able to take over these responsibilities. In some cases, mayors in Niger lack the competences and financial means needed to carry out the new duties given to them. The LISF and the LGSP are intended to bridge this gap so that local authorities can build their capacities and become more effective.

BETWEEN POLITICAL INSTABILITY AND CLIMATE INSECURITY: LOCAL PUBLIC GOVERNANCE IN MALI

Just like with its activities in the other countries of western Africa, the SDC has made enormous investments in strengthening local actors in Mali. Active in the regions of Sikasso, Mopti, and Timbuktu, its programmes aim at the emergence of local development with institutions and civil society capable of delivering quality public services. Although last March's coup d'état caused a temporary interruption in the SDC's activities, it nonetheless did not bring the whole programme in Mali to a halt. Outside of Timbuktu and the other ter-

ritories in the north, SDC's partners continued their support in the other two priority regions.

Despite the difficult context, Mali can pride itself on some interesting examples in the management of local affairs. This is for instance the case with Koutiala, a city and a circle¹ situated in the centre of the country, which represents one of the areas where the Programme for Urban Social Development (PUSD) is being implemented. Launched by the Malian State and supported by the SDC, the programme's objective is to improve the living conditions in cities like Koutiala and its neighbouring communes. To succeed, it was necessary to invest in the infrastructures destined to stimulate the local economy.

At the beginning, studies were carried out to determine the projects which were to fulfil the basic needs of the local actors, and to identify the potential areas for the economic development of the city and its hinterland. The studies revealed insufficient links between the city of Koutiala and the 36 communes of its circle both on the level of special planning and on that of economic activities.

With this in mind, the SDC began supporting several projects of special planning and improvement of access and connection to the outside, so as to better connect the "Mother" city of Koutiala and its rural peripheral areas. One can cite a long list of examples like the inter-communal lane Pessoba – Karangana Mallé – N'Tossoni 17km in length, the realization of a sewage drainage system more than 8km long, the construction of a cattle stockyard complex covering 3ha in N'Togonasso, micro-dams in the communes of Fakolo and Kapala, commercial infrastructures in Koutiala, etc.

The social and citizen mobilization that accompanied this process of creating infrastructures facilitated the organization

1 Similar to the canons of Switzerland, the circles concentrate a large number of communes and villages within their area. The city of Koutiala is the capital of the circle which bears its name. The circles have been part of Mali's administrative configuration since 1999. There are 49 circles in the country.

of users associations and made it possible to train them to manage and service the construction works. The territorial communes that backed these projects signed agreements with these users associations delegating the projects to them, along with their subsequent exploitation and the management of the infrastructures. Moreover, the 36 communes and the "Mother" city of Koutiala formed a communal group to better coordinate economic development activities among themselves. Farmers and live-stock breeders organized themselves into co-operatives to better defend the interests of their peripheral rural area.

In the end, these projects made it possible to better attune rural production to the requirements of urban households, thus creating employment and income for the local populations. Socio-economic activities made a significant leap, just as did both agricultural production and productivity. All of this had positive effects on food security and the local economy.

Several key Malian partners gave their backing to this national programme, whose leverage effects on aspects such as infrastructure, fiscal receipts, and administrative/financial management are not to be disputed. The SDC is counting on utilizing its experiences in Koutiala to strengthen local development in other regions of Mali.

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