

## CHAPTER 8

# CITIZEN CONTROL OF PUBLIC ACTION: THE SOCIAL WATCH NETWORK IN BENIN

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**Cyrille Chabi Eteka and Anne Floquet**

In the 1990s, the democratization of Benin's public institutions, together with government withdrawal from the production of many social goods, promoted the emergence of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). Initially, NGOs and CBOs were meant to take over the provision of public services. Gradually, they would also defend the interests of their members or intended beneficiaries. At the same time, civil society organizations (CSOs) from other countries intervened at the international level through multilateral summits to make other voices heard besides those of government.

Social Watch International emerged within this context by federating national networks willing to monitor the adherence to commitments made during international summits by their governments and by the international community. The Social Watch Benin network of NGOs was initially created to monitor the United Nations (UN) Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). However, because of the national issues at stake and the involvement of some of the network's members in the Benin Social Watch's Citizen Control of Public Action (CCPA) initiative at a local or sectoral level, the network broadened the scope of its activities to the national level.

The CCPA experience has allowed CSOs and grassroots participants to increase their contributions to the establishment of good governance practices to achieve the MDGs. Social Watch has also developed dialogue and advocacy capabilities with different Beninese institutions such as the Economic and Social Council and the National Assembly. In addition, Social

Watch has achieved significant results in the formulation of development policies, in the management of public affairs, and in changing authorities' perception of the competence of civil society.

This chapter presents the experience of Social Watch Benin, including a discussion of two alternative reports prepared by CSOs about the MDGs in Benin, CSOs' involvement in preparing the second Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP 2007–09), and a critical analysis of the government's 2007 national budget.

The chapter emphasizes the original aspects of Social Watch Benin's initiative, which combines capacity building, critical analysis, research, dialogue with the state, advocacy, and demands. In addition, it describes and examines the following:

- The strong alliances built among CSOs, the media, and resource persons
- The limitations of voluntary mobilization of CSO members whose organizations have not included CCPA initiatives in their action plans or budgets
- How these processes can be institutionalized without making the mistake of delegating them to experts
- The key lessons learned

## POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

After its independence in 1960, Benin experienced a period of intense instability with frequent military coups and popular demonstrations. The October 26, 1972, coup opened the way to a military regime claiming to adhere to revolutionary socialist ideas. In 1975, with the transition to a single-party regime—the People's Revolutionary Party of Benin—political militancy prevailed. The people gradually lost confidence in the government and their leaders, demobilized, and lost motivation for productive activity.

The economic crisis of the late 1980s, the implementation of structural adjustment policies and their social impacts, and political tensions collectively led to the February 1990 *Conférence des Forces Vives de la Nation* (Conference of the Forces of the Nation). This major national forum, the first of its kind in Africa, ushered in a political and social détente that enabled the people of Benin to adopt a new constitution by referendum on December 2, 1990. Since then, the country has made undisputed political progress. Gradually, the institutional framework

and mechanisms of a formal democracy have been created. A liberal democracy was established with separation of powers and a broad multi-party system.

In principle, Benin is in a relatively enviable position regarding the right of association, the freedom of expression and the media, and the electoral process. It is one of the few countries in Africa that has held several elections since 1990 (five legislative elections and four presidential elections) in a peaceful environment of political pluralism and changes in political power. Boni Yayi won the 2006 presidential elections, bringing in an administration that swept away the team led (from 1972 to 1991 and again from 1996 to 2006) by former President Mathieu Kérékou. In December 2002, Benin organized its first local elections in accordance with the February 1990 recommendations to decentralize territorial administration to promote grass-roots democracy and boost local development.

### **The NGOs' Service-Providing Role**

Structural adjustment policies have imposed a reduction in public employees, and many public functions have been transferred to the private sector. However, private actors are less interested in unprofitable social goods, and professional organizations and NGOs have gradually taken up the training of service producers, the fight against illiteracy, providing help for undernourished children and advisory services for the agricultural sector, and so on. For example, professional farmers' organizations created a strong federation by channeling resources from the cotton market to organize a coalition of farmers' groups.

Nongovernmental service providers generally depend on external resources to carry out their mission. Some organizations are created by government agents who mobilize public resources, while others are created for patronage and election purposes and have short lives. After more than 10 years, respectable and rather solid NGOs with diversified portfolios and recognized expertise have emerged. Because they do not depend on government funding, they have gradually begun to conduct critical analysis of public action.

Benin has one level of decentralization: the commune. Decentralization laws confer upon communes great autonomy and broad jurisdiction over primary education, primary health care, social protection, water supply, sewage disposal, housing and land use, market management, road maintenance, and so on. To date, however, although basic service provision has

been transferred, the government has not transferred equivalent budget resources to the communes. Therefore, people are dissatisfied with the services provided by their local governments, and pressure groups have been created to defend their interests or to demand their mayors' resignations. They voice their disappointment through local radio stations during programs with suggestive names such as "Morning Discontent." Four out of 77 mayors have been removed from office. Management of local affairs is a major issue between local authorities and citizens.

### **Tolls on Economic and Human Development**

Agriculture is the leading sector of Benin's economy. Food production, well below its potential, barely increases at the same pace as population growth. Cotton, Benin's major export, suffers from declining global prices and poor governance. As a result, poverty tends to be higher in rural areas.

In the absence of an industrial sector, mostly commercial activities and services are being developed. Commerce is based largely on cross-border exchanges and transit. Investors benefit from variations in currency exchange rates without investing in productive infrastructure. Increasing urbanization during the past 15 years has developed focal points of growth, but most of the urban workforce is in the informal sector whose health depends on the growth of the formal sector. If at first income seemed to be rising in the cities, recent surveys show that poverty has increased there as well.

Benin's ranking in the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Index is continuously falling; in 2004, it ranked 162nd among 174 countries. Life expectancy at birth in 2002 was 59 years. In spite of efforts to improve education and access to water and primary health care, the gap with other countries is widening. More than two-thirds of Benin's population is illiterate; the literacy rate is 48 percent for men and 28 percent for women, for a gender parity index of 0.58. Therefore, the progress in terms of democracy and governance was not accompanied by significant economic and social development.

After the UN Millennium Declaration that set the eight MDGs in 2000, Benin formulated a development policy, adopted its first poverty reduction strategy (for 2003–05), and monitored its progress. This allowed Benin to qualify in 2003 for the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries completion point, and its multilateral debt was canceled in September 2005. However, economic growth decreased from 5 percent in 2003 to 4.5 percent in

2006 against a target of 7 percent (the level needed to reduce poverty given the population growth rate).

### **The Growing Consensus against Corruption**

Despite external debt relief, Benin faces huge shortages of funds because of a large public deficit and substantial arrears in state treasury payments. These difficulties arose partly from an unfavorable macroeconomic context (higher energy prices, lower cotton prices), but public spending was also inefficient, and a sense of impunity generated an insecure fiscal climate that was detrimental to private investment. For example, the program budgets to implement the PRSP in priority ministries have a low execution rate. In certain regions, cotton producers had to wait years to be paid for their crops although the cotton had been ginned and sold. Political and institutional reforms have not facilitated economic growth and more equitable income distribution. Corruption, injustice, and political investments are widespread.

The importance of introducing ethical standards in government had already been highlighted during the February 1990 Conference of the Forces of the Nation. In 1996, the government established an ethics committee for public management, which would report directly to the president's office. In 1998, after discussions with NGOs, the government organized a Forum for the Mobilization of Civil Society in the fight against corruption. As a result, a consensus has formed in Benin on the need to fight corruption. Newspaper articles frequently denounce corruption, and numerous radio and television programs also address the subject. However, civil society, citizens, and politicians cite different reasons for corruption, and scandals are rarely sanctioned. In such a context, an apparatus for evaluating public governance through citizen control appears to be critical.

In fact, several CSOs have undertaken initiatives to encourage citizen participation, advocacy, and control over public action. Some NGOs specialize in fighting against corruption or for human rights or consumer protection. NGOs often support user associations (for example, parents' associations, management committees for health centers and water supply points) and workers unions or professional organizations, mainly of farmers. Even though user associations encounter difficulties at the national level (professional organizations and unions have overcome similar obstacles by expanding from the local to the subregional level), they all intervene in

communes as soon as the opportunities arise. Some NGOs have decided to work on capacity building of these local actors so they can become key figures in commune planning, municipality monitoring, and service quality assessment.

### THE CITIZEN CONTROL OF PUBLIC ACTION (CCPA) INITIATIVE

The CCPA initiative was launched by Social Watch Benin, a network of CSOs. Its strategic actions relate to the contribution of civil society to the elaboration of the PRSP, the evaluation of the achievement of the MDGs, the analysis of the government's national budget, and specific advocacy activities. Social Watch Benin is part of Social Watch International, created in 1995 to monitor the implementation of international commitments of governments and international organizations, particularly those made during the summits held in Copenhagen (March 1995) and Beijing (September 1995).

During the UN Millennium Development Summit of September 2000, world leaders adopted a new vision of development in the form of eight MDGs. As a signatory to the Millennium Declaration, Benin took a new direction in the fight against poverty in collaboration with its development partners. Within this framework, the first government report on MDGs was prepared in 2003.

In spite of significant potential due to the national political climate, the mobilization of civil society actors as an effective pressure group within the framework of the MDGs and the PRSP was limited. Few CSOs focused on control over public action, locally or nationally. Most NGOs lack resources and instead provide services for partners. Moreover, the state undermines the determination of many CSO leaders to engage in CCPA because their organizations are sometimes funded by government-created networks. Nevertheless, some of these organizations, such as the Observatory for the Fight against Corruption and the National Front of Organizations for the Fight against Corruption have spoken out about embezzlement and corruption in public management. Their intervention was sometimes discredited by people who have limited knowledge of public management, do not trust the stated idealism of NGO leaders, claim they have more practical objectives, or believe NGOs have certain political leanings.

Proper financial management is necessary to achieve the MDGs and the PRS. Therefore, Sœurs Unies à l'Oeuvre (United Sisters at Work, or SUO) developed the idea of mobilizing Beninese CSOs in a network that would monitor government policies, the implementation of the PRS, and the achievement of the MDGs. The CCPA initiative, which built on this, was formed to promote good management in the public sector and to fight the corruption and bad governance that are poisoning public institutions in Benin. The network was created in March 2005 following a national workshop on civil society involvement during the review of the Millennium Summit, which SUO organized in collaboration with UNDP and the Netherlands Development Organisation.

SUO was in charge of the network's coordination for a three-year period. The network also has a technical committee composed of representatives of SUO, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF-Benin); Centre Afrika Obota; Réseau d'Intégration des Femmes des ONG et Associations Africaines (Network for the Integration of Women of Non-Governmental Organizations and African Associations, or RIFONGA-Benin); Groupe de Recherche et d'Action Pour le Développement (Group Research and Action for the Promotion of Agriculture and Development, or GRAPAD); and GLEGBENU.<sup>1</sup> More than 150 CSOs and development organizations make up the CCPA network, which operates in all Beninese communes.

### **The Strong Role of Women**

Women have strong representation in the Social Watch network. Three of the six CSOs on the technical committee are women's organizations and are represented by women. In the national coordinating committee, composed of representatives of 17 CSOs, at least four have gender-related issues as their main objective (WILDAF, RIFONGA-Benin, ROBS,<sup>2</sup> and SUO), and many others work for increased social and economic integration of women (for example, the Benin Centre for Environment and Economic and Social Development [CEBEDES] and GRAPAD). Six of the national coordinating committee's members, including the coordinator and the vice coordinator, are women.

Women also take part in or are in charge of the work groups that carry out budget analyses and contributed to the preparation of the PRSP. To date, however, there has been no gender-sensitive analysis of the budget.

## Social Watch Objectives and Pilot Activities

The main objectives of Social Watch are the following:

- Reinforce CSO advocacy to influence government and development partner decisions and actions to promote political changes in favor of the poor
- Participate effectively with government institutions and financial partners in the preparation, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of the PRS
- Monitor the preparation, implementation, and evaluation of the national budget and the budgets of Benin's communes, paying particular attention to aspects that affect the poor and the use of public development aid to contribute to good public resource management
- Prepare an annual civil society report on implementation of the MDGs and PRS in Benin
- Create awareness and mobilize citizens using the press, radio, and television
- Organize civil society in communes and thematic areas for effective community participation in social development processes
- Develop monitoring activities by local Social Watch committees on the implementation of local community development plans

Activities related to the last two objectives have not been fully developed in most communes. Social Watch Benin is in its early stages, and its activities will gradually expand to include grassroots participation. Moreover, decentralization began only in 2003. Local authorities completed their first term at the end of 2007. During these first years of decentralization, communes have prepared local development plans, some of which involved different social groups, but they lacked the resources needed for implementation.

Considering that both Social Watch Benin and local authorities are still so recent, the network launched its activities in four pilot communes: one in the north (Parakou), one in the southeast (Ifangni), and two in the southwest (Athiéme and Lokossa). The network based its choices mainly on the dynamism of NGOs working in those communes.

Network activities receive technical support from the government. UNDP, Dutch and German organizations, and the Embassy of the Netherlands provide mainly financial support. Member organizations contribute member fees and their members to different activities.



## STRATEGIES, METHODS, AND TECHNIQUES

As previously mentioned, Social Watch Benin launched the CCPA initiative as a mechanism for building and mobilizing citizen control to evaluate public governance. Many of its activities, therefore, bring together organizations, citizens, the media, and resource persons to monitor government policies, PRS implementation, progress toward achieving the MDGs, and national budgetary allocations. This section further describes CCPA's strategic decisions, actions, and tools—including capacity-building activities, critical analysis, research, dialogue with the state, advocacy, popular mobilization, media relations, and alliance building.

### Structure and Human Resources

Social Watch Benin's permanent organization and operational structure is a compact unit. The executive secretariat is in charge of implementing the network's action plan, managing everyday tasks, compiling information, and providing members with information. The secretariat coordinates with the international Social Watch network and coordinates programs for national, regional, or international activities. It has three permanent members and temporary members for specific activities.

Depending on the activity, the network's human resources include its members, voluntary resource persons, and consultants. Ad hoc work and analysis groups are created at the national level and, increasingly, at the local level. Local presence is introduced gradually because many local authorities discredit actors or actions whose objective is to monitor or control the management of local affairs. Such resistance is why the network chose four pilot communes to test the approach and gather experience before expanding to other communes. In addition, some NGO members of the network carry out citizen control actions in other communes. For example, CEBEDES works in nine communes of the Zou Department.

### Training and Other Tools

Social Watch's activities are promoted through training workshops, awareness building, advocacy, and other tools. Workshops have focused particularly on learning how to read and analyze the national budget to help trainees determine whether the budget contributes to poverty reduction, is favorable to rural areas, and takes into account the priorities of social

sectors. Workshop participants include leaders of CSOs affiliated with the network and journalists of the press, radio, and television (mostly television newscasters and presenters at local and community radio stations). Particular attention is given to CSOs affiliated with the network.

Approximately 100 participants attended the first workshop, which took place in Cotonou, Benin's largest city. Two other training workshops on local budget analysis were organized by zone (south and north) and attended by 50 presenters and journalists in each zone. Even if actions undertaken by CSOs and journalists are still barely perceptible at the commune level, the network is taking measures to better prepare and reinforce their intervention capacity.

### **Alternative Reports on Achieving the MDGs**

Social Watch used resource persons within and outside the network to prepare the first annual government-independent report on the achievement of MDGs (Social Watch Benin 2005). Six resource persons, chosen through bid invitations, completed a draft report. A review panel modified it, and the resource persons presented the findings to the network's technical committee, the review panel, and the resource persons to harmonize viewpoints. Four resource persons, members of the technical committee, then revised the report. The review panel made more changes, and a validation workshop was organized to collect comments and observations from development partners, private and public stakeholders, and CSO members. A technical committee was established to incorporate the changes gathered from the workshop and to finalize the report.

The second annual alternative report in 2006 took a different approach (Social Watch Benin 2006b). Social Watch created a thematic group for each of the 12 priority targets of the MDGs, clustered into three main themes:

1. Promoting sustainable economic growth and development of the agricultural sector
2. Improving the provision of basic social services
3. Advocating fulfillment of commitments on aid, commerce, and the promotion of Benin's cultural potential

Resource persons from these thematic groups, often members of network CSOs, were asked to work on the report. Because the resource persons were members of civil society (not involved in government actions), their

views appeared representative of Benin's citizens. These resource persons studied the first report to determine their line of research. Limited resources did not allow for an exhaustive analysis, so the groups prepared a partial study of the progress achieved on the MDGs and identified the remaining challenges.

The resource persons contacted government officials in charge of MDG implementation and collected data from line ministries, state institutions, CSOs, diplomatic missions, and international organizations. Government agencies facilitated access to information, but it is not known whether the information was accurate because the resource persons had neither the time nor the financial and material resources to verify the government-provided data. Moreover, the organization of data collection did not allow for periodic monitoring of activities in the field. Objective assessment of progress left much to be desired. However, the thematic groups began by assessing the implementation of recommendations made in the first report and then submitted concrete suggestions according to each specific theme. At the end of the analysis, each group presented a draft report.

These reports were submitted to a panel of writers who merged the contributions of the thematic groups into a single draft report. After a prevalidation workshop with reviewers and editors, the writers incorporated those comments and recommendations into the draft during the validation workshop and finalized the alternative report for 2006. The report was launched with significant media coverage and in the presence of government authorities. This report had been prepared with a much larger public participation even if citizen feedback was not yet available to verify and complete the analyses. The report, however, did allow some public officials to express their thoughts on the MDG implementation process.

The 2006 report's major conclusions and recommendations included the following:

- The cotton sector suffers from governance problems, with disastrous effects on the welfare of the rural population.
- The intention of the new government to boost the economy by promoting agricultural diversification is welcome, but it must also support small producers.
- Regarding the gender issue, there has been limited implementation of important legal and institutional reforms (several laws have been passed for the protection of human rights).

- Health plans have been drawn up and are pending implementation. They must be monitored and evaluated with the participation of NGOs working in this field.
- Opaque management impedes assessment of government projects, particularly those concerning HIV patients.
- Living conditions are an important measure of poverty.
- Development aid to Benin has not yielded the expected results because of inadequate allocation of resources and poor management of funds.
- The open economy and trade liberalization have not benefited the Beninese. Social Watch recommends public dialogue before signing partnership or cooperation agreements.

The 2006 report openly denounced the government's failure to act upon most recommendations of the 2005 report. Launched during discussions for the preparation of the second PRS, the 2006 report sought to influence decision makers to consider poverty reduction objectives. It contained precise and detailed criticisms of government shortcomings (for example, the excessively centralized management of assistance to AIDS victims or the shortage of antiretroviral drugs) and proposed concrete recommendations for parliament (for example, passing laws on illicit enrichment); government (among others, a policy for protecting the interests of local producers and establishment of an effective regulatory body for the cotton sector); and civil society itself.

In the end, however, there may have been too many good ideas. The main thread of criticism was lost among too many recommendations, and the role and priorities of the civil society were not clearly defined.

### **Monitoring the National Budget**

In September 2006, Social Watch created a Budget Analysis Unit to carry out critical analysis of the national budget. The unit is composed of three heads of the thematic groups that monitor progress on MDGs and approximately 15 "tutors" (sociologists, economists, and political and legal experts) experienced in reading and analyzing budgets.

The 2007 budget was the first to be analyzed. After several training sessions on how to read a national budget, the heads of the 12 thematic groups and representatives of civil society resource organizations met in October 2006 for an analysis workshop at the West African News-media and Development Centre in Cotonou. Workshop results were compiled

in a critical report and sent to the National Assembly, the Economic and Social Council, and the government the day before the budget was to be presented at the National Assembly. Workshop participants analyzed, sector by sector and line by line, all budget allocations to make sure they were consistent with national strategies aimed at the reduction of social inequalities.

The Budget Analysis Unit noticed a reduction of budget allocations for water, urban and rural roads, housing, and so on. Taking into consideration that these cutbacks could be justified by decentralization measures that devolved powers to local authorities, the unit asked the government to indicate precisely where the budget allocated the corresponding resources to those local authorities. Concerning primary education, for example, the budget for schools did not reflect the increase in the number of students. The already meager budget of the Ministry of the Family, Women, and Children was significantly smaller, particularly in the budget provisions concerning child trafficking, social mobility, and the advancement of women.

Experience also had shown that aid to the indigent population was inefficiently managed. The report showed that management is centralized and excludes communes as well as health and social centers from the decision-making process.

The analysis unit also expressed great concern about limited allocations for housing and the imprecision of some allocations. For example, resources had not been clearly earmarked for agricultural development, and it was feared that public funds would support certain businesses to the detriment of small farmers. Moreover, the increase in the budget of the Benin President's Office was not clearly justified.

### **Advising and Monitoring the PRS**

In Benin, civil society had played only an advisory role in the preparation of the first-generation PRSP. PRS implementation was supposed to have been monitored by committees representing different social groups, including communes, but the committees' creation was delayed and, given neither the support nor the necessary means, they failed to perform their intended role. Therefore, Social Watch collaborated with financial and technical partners and received government supports to implement a project involving civil society in effective monitoring of the second-generation PRSP.

The first action undertaken by the Social Watch project was to incorporate network representatives into the nine thematic groups organized by the former National Committee for Development and the Fight against Poverty (CNDLP),<sup>3</sup> which was the official body in charge of formulating the PRSP. Each thematic group conducted a diagnostic analysis and developed strategic actions to be implemented within the framework of the second PRSP. These representatives enabled Social Watch to play an active role in advocating that the PRSP take into account its effects on living conditions at the grassroots level.

The second action was the creation of a grassroots consultation mechanism that would identify people's concerns and priorities and incorporate them into the PRS. A questionnaire was prepared and validated. The collection of data covered the entire nation. Data validation at departmental and national levels was made possible by regional coordination units, Social Watch local committees, and partners of the project. While the data were being collected in the field, regular meetings were organized with Social Watch representatives from the different thematic groups to discuss ongoing debates in the thematic groups and to give network representatives the tools that would enable them to intervene effectively in the debates. The grassroots consultation process allowed Social Watch to prepare a solid contribution based on grassroots concerns and to identify the issues to be addressed to achieve the MDGs (for example, precise and decentralized actions targeting the poor, quick intervention in crisis situations, and so forth).

Social Watch data collection efforts were constrained, however, because the network did not prepare an adequate budget at the start, and it lacked the necessary resources to organize feedback workshops at the grassroots level. Workshops were organized in each department, but they could have started on a smaller scale with districts and communes.

The network's contribution to the second PRS was compiled in a single document and submitted to the CNDLP (Social Watch Benin 2006a). An evaluation of the first PRS had shown significant delays in the implementation of the reforms, explainable by poor ownership of the PRS by institutions charged with its implementation. Social Watch suggested making the MDGs operational so the PRSP can take them into consideration. For instance, the PRSP should take into account the powers devolved to communes, which are now responsible or share responsibility for the implementation of social sector infrastructure and for performance deficits. The governance issue was discussed, emphasizing the

need to continue the decentralization process and CSOs' participation in monitoring local government. Finally, suggestions were aimed at developing a more operational classification of the different types of poverty. Specific actions targeting these groups were recommended, along with mechanisms for decentralized prevention and intervention.

### **Monitoring Local Government**

Citizen control is well on its way in nine communes through a project conducted by CEBEDES and financially supported by the Danish International Development Agency. CEBEDES has worked for many years in support of decentralization, was involved in preparing local development plans in the nine communes, and continues to participate in programs that help these communes establish better dialogue with their citizens. It is also involved in other programs that build local CSOs' capacity in monitoring and control of public affairs.

In the commune-level project, after assessment and validation during feedback workshops, monitoring and control procedures were discussed in detail with NGOs, committees that manage social and community property, professional organizations, elected officials, and technical services. All actors had the opportunity to discuss what they were expected to do in monitoring the commune budget, contract awards, civil registry services, and management of infrastructure such as markets.

Building on the consensus achieved, a manual of local government monitoring procedures was prepared. These procedures are based on current legislation and may help mayors to exercise prerogatives that vested interests had questioned. (For example, the management of road transport stations where taxes on taxis and trucks can be collected was challenged by professional driver associations.) Indeed, government does not have a monopoly on bad governance!

### **Disseminating Information**

Social Watch's work is presented and made public through community and local radio stations, newspapers, and television channels. Social Watch invited journalists to participate in budget analysis workshops in Cotonou and training sessions that were specifically organized for journalists in all Beninese departments. The research carried out by thematic groups is published and presented in conferences. Contracts

are signed on a weekly, monthly, and quarterly basis with private and public media representatives to disseminate network activities. Information dissemination through these media created public awareness, explained the mission of Social Watch, and encouraged citizen support of network actions.

## **KEY ISSUES AND CHALLENGES**

CCPA also faced several problems and constraints in executing its programs, including those in the four major areas explained below: limited leadership capacity, lack of financial resources, people's distrust or lack of knowledge about CSOs, and struggles with the government to make public information more accessible.

### **Leadership**

The leadership of thematic groups is not as dynamic as it should be because their leaders are often not available—possibly because they must find time for network activities in addition to their responsibilities in their respective organizations and because the financial compensation they receive is far less than the services they provide. Because network activities have not been included in their organizations' planning, leaders of thematic groups are under a lot of pressure and find it extremely difficult to keep their commitments to the network. This explains the relatively little progress made by most groups.

The Budget Analysis Unit encountered fewer constraints because the Coordinating Committee hired an assistant to help the executive secretary prepare methodology notes, contact tutors who were difficult to reach because of their multiple roles, and contribute to the activities of the unit.

### **Lack of Resources**

Internal operations are also limited by the lack of financial resources. The CCPA initiative is supported by development partners. To become a member of the network, CSOs must pay a membership fee of CFAF 50,000 and an annual fee of CFAF 25,000. However, only about 50 CSOs have paid all their fees; it is difficult for CSOs to pay their fees on time because they do not receive government support even if they are actively involved in



achieving the MDGs. Only large NGOs or those with a wide range of activities (providers of services to the government or development partners) can pay their membership fees. NGOs with limited resources are willing to pay but cannot because of extremely limited means or even none at all.

Legislation could correct this situation, but unfortunately, the law does not provide for budget allocations for CSOs that fall within the framework of “humanitarian public actions.” Moreover, any kind of government support to such CSOs could divert them from their ideals if the donor were to pressure them.

In addition, the young network lacks experience and has difficulty planning and preparing a budget for its activities. Many activities were assigned insufficient funds and could not be carried out. As a result, network leaders must develop activities with modest financial support, which may undermine motivation.

The network’s organization—based on a General Assembly, a Coordinating Committee, and an Executive Secretariat—makes it possible to avoid conflicts over the network’s actions and mission. However, in spite of the many CSOs that belong to the network, it is still difficult to have network presence in all 77 communes. In each of the former six departments, an area leader has been identified to represent the Coordinating Committee. Likewise, each commune should have a network unit to organize monitoring activities of local development policies.

Still in its early stages, Social Watch Benin has operational local units in only four pilot communes. In these four communes, the local authorities consider CSOs to be “enemies” with whom they are not quite prepared to collaborate. In addition, departmental delegations cannot function adequately because they lack the resources needed to follow up local units. Local citizen control is inadequate and does not even exist in most communes. The network does not have local representatives. In general, grassroots organizations do not try to monitor local government.

### **Confusion about Social Watch and CSOs**

Another problem limiting the impact of Social Watch activities involves the people’s perceptions of civil society. That many individuals use CSOs as a stepping stone for their political, social, or professional advancement confuses many people who cannot easily separate legitimate CSOs from fakes. Most people are convinced that CSO leaders, like political leaders, are simply trying to protect their own material interests. It is hard for

them to believe that some might seek to achieve better governance and citizen advancement.

Because distrust is rampant, many CSOs with good intentions are discouraged. Constant vigilance is necessary because some CSOs do hide, behind a façade of social commitment, their true intentions of malicious criticism and personal political advantage. The confidence of elected officials that was so hard to win could quickly be lost.

### **Struggles to Increase Government Cooperation**

Local monitoring is possible only if both sides are willing to make it work. Communes where monitoring mechanisms are implemented have mayors and local officials with an open attitude and willingness to communicate. The officials in those communes believe that monitoring will protect them from malicious gossip and will act as a deterrent to internal disorder.

Likewise, sectoral monitoring and monitoring of the national budget is possible only if the government is willing to make information public and in such a way that it can be read and understood by ordinary citizens. The national budget now appears to be available for public discussion before it is voted on by parliament, but it is not yet available in the form of program budgets with verifiable indicators. Not all ministries have undergone planning reform, and it is not possible to have an overall view of the budgetary situation. Therefore, monitoring economic governance is a difficult task. The network has criticized the lack of a clear and easy-to-read budget.

## **RESULTS AND IMPACTS**

The CCPA experience has allowed the mobilization of CSOs and grassroots participation to increase their contribution to establishing good governance practices for the achievement of the MDGs. Social Watch has also developed dialogue and advocacy capabilities with different Beninese institutions such as the Economic and Social Council and the National Assembly, introducing new dynamics in the process. Significant results have also been achieved in the formulation of development policies and in the management of public affairs. The CCPA initiative has also affected the authorities' perception of the competence of civil society and the positive impacts of engaging in dialogue.

### **Enhanced CSO Capacity**

In less than two years, many CSOs have built their capacities in fundamental areas of citizen control of public action. The Social Watch network organized several capacity-building workshops that have helped its members develop a common vision on CCPA and how to put it into practice. More than 200 people from CSOs, the media, and the Budget Analysis Unit have studied Benin's public finances, budgetary procedures and mechanisms, mobilization strategies, and use of resources. These individuals have significantly increased their capacity to analyze a budget in order to suggest alternatives that will protect citizens' social and economic rights, particularly those of the poor and vulnerable. The Budget Analysis Unit prepared a guide on how to read national and sectoral budgets and how to analyze them according to each MDG. The unit's members have a good knowledge of the MDGs and of the constraints that must be overcome to achieve them. Collective skills are being developed to formulate development and poverty reduction strategies that convey the concerns of different social groups.

### **Increased Support for Community Action**

For the first time, dozens of Beninese CSOs devoted to development mobilized and participated actively and effectively in CCPA activities. Their performance was less conditioned than usual by remuneration or similar considerations. Most members understood that citizen control requires dedication that will be rewarded by better public governance.

### **Improved Relations with the Media**

The network has also greatly improved its relationships with the media, an area where CSO members are often lacking, thereby limiting their visibility and dissemination capacity. This visibility could be one of the benefits for CSOs that invest effort in the network. Journalists have shown through their actions that they understand and share the vision of Social Watch Benin. Communication plans were adopted to disseminate network actions, and contracts have been signed with the media to effectively support citizen awareness-building actions and develop effective and efficient citizen monitoring.

### **Scant Impact on Formulation and Monitoring of Development Policies**

The 2006 alternative report analyzed public action in relation to the recommendations of the first report and made many suggestions. The analysis showed that few recommendations from the first report had been taken into account. Social Watch condemns this loss of a year as a result of inactivity and the misappropriation of public funds by individuals reaching the end of their careers. However, the network confirmed citizen expectations in terms of good governance and public accountability. The lack of impact may be explained by the end-of-term atmosphere before the 2006 elections, which left the newly elected team without public funds and with higher poverty indicators than in 2000.

### **Limited Impact on the Public Budget**

Even if the contribution of the Budget Analysis Unit is limited because it cannot propose any budget allocations without matching them with additional financing, it has given its opinion on existing allocations. According to the network's executive secretary, many recommendations have been taken into consideration by the government, and the network received a copy of the revised budget, allowing Social Watch to verify that its concerns had been taken into account.

### **Improved Civil Society Credibility**

All of Social Watch's actions have had a major impact in establishing the credibility of civil society and its capacity to carry out critical analysis and to formulate proposals. It is too early to suggest that Social Watch has had a direct impact on public policies, even though it has most likely contributed to the debate on economic development and on the types of businesses that should be promoted. Social Watch has also called attention to the existence of extreme poverty in certain areas and social groups and has proven its capacity to ensure citizen control of government action.

## **FACTORS FOR SUCCESS AND LESSONS LEARNED**

Social Watch's CCPA initiative and its results are closely related to Benin's political process, which has been a model of democracy in Africa since

1990. The creation of opposition parties, freedom of association, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press are fertile ground for the CCPA experience that is unfolding in Benin. The nature and quality of the political environment make it possible.

In addition, Social Watch can benefit from the new Beninese political scene. The new government team does not feel threatened in any way by the criticism directed toward its predecessors. Even better, it has defined, as its political principles, the engagement of dialogue with citizens and establishment of a code of conduct for government management. Information on government activities is no longer treated as confidential. On the contrary, it is available to all. Authorities have adopted a favorable attitude toward Social Watch. Government officials who are conscious of the government's opaque and deficient management and of its inability to reform itself now welcome proposals that could help improve its performance and develop citizen control actions.

Voluntary civil participation is a sign of citizen maturity. However, CSOs must have adequate financial and human resources and be capable of supporting each other if they are to preserve their political credibility. Only then can the CSOs in Benin (a) guarantee the continuity of CCPA initiatives and widen their scope for long-term monitoring of local and sectoral actions, (b) carry out periodic evaluations of user satisfaction, (c) expand media coverage of advocacy actions, and (d) engage in concerted civil society activities at a subregional level.

## NOTES

1. A part of Alliance 21 ("glegbenu" means resolute and vivacious in Fon, a national language).
2. The Beninese Health NGO Network.
3. This committee became the Monitoring Unit for Economic and Structural Reform Programs (CSPRES).

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