

Promising Practices

The human rights-based approach (HRBA) in German development cooperation: Strengthening citizen participation and local governance in Benin to leave no one behind

Background

Since 1990 Benin has initiated several administrative reforms to stabilise democracy and reduce poverty. Considerable progress has been achieved with decentralisation processes in the last 15 years. However, the transfer of resources and competencies from central to local authorities for basic service provision remains limited. Local own revenue mobilisation is persistently low and municipal employees lack capacities to implement development policies that meet citizens' needs. Citizens only have few possibilities to participate in local decision-making processes, especially marginalised persons and groups, such as women, youth and persons with disabilities.

The GIZ Programme 'Supporting Decentralisation and Municipal Development (PDDC)' – on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) – supports 25 municipalities in enhancing their ability to provide services. PDDC started in 2004 and uses a multi-stakeholder and multi-level approach. It implements measures in the following areas:

- localising the 2030 Agenda by strengthening the responsibilities of municipalities in planning, implementing and monitoring Benin's prioritized targets of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs);
- furthering fiscal decentralisation and local own revenue mobilisation;
- capacity building of municipal administrations;
- promotion of local democracy, citizen participation in local governance and multi-stakeholder cooperation – co-financed by the European Union.

Towards a Human Rights-Based Approach

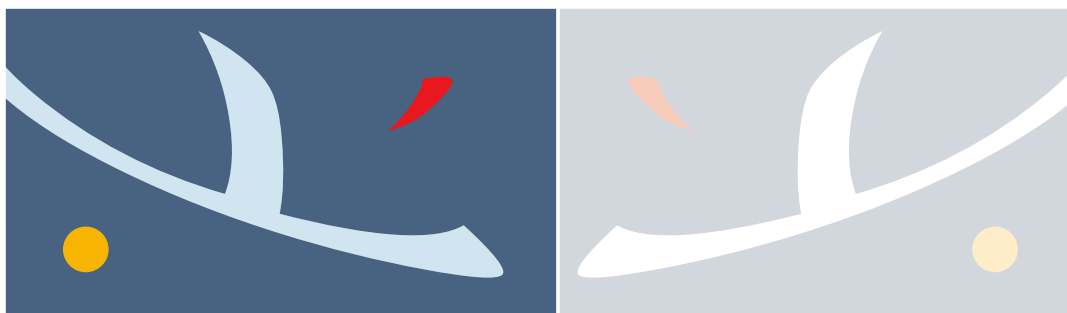
Human rights framework

Benin has ratified all core human rights treaties and regularly reports on progress and challenges. Several human rights are relevant with regard to public service provision, including the right to non-discrimination, the right to information as well as social and economic rights, such as the rights to health, education and water.

Non-discrimination of women in the political and public life, including the right to participate in policy formulation and implementation and to hold public office is enshrined in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities stipulates that states should promote actively an environment in which persons with disabilities can effectively and fully participate in the conduct of public affairs, without discrimination and on an equal basis with others.

PDDC aims to improve effective citizen participation in local governance through modernising communal management. All measures are guided by the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda's principles of 'leave no one behind', 'shared responsibility' and 'accountability'.

PDDC's approach is based on human rights principles (participation, empowerment, non-discrimination, equal opportunities, transparency and accountability) as well as human rights standards, such as affordable, accessible and adequate public services.



In order to raise awareness among local stakeholders, to provide information or to facilitate dialogue digital communication tools are often used, such as WhatsApp groups or the application “communes 229”.



PDDC empowers disadvantaged individuals as rights-holders to enable them to effectively participate in development processes and to claim their rights. Likewise the programme improves local authorities' awareness and capacities in their role as duty-bearers. PDDC focuses on:

- Capacity building of civil society and community-based organisations:** PDDC strengthens eight Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) from seven regions in Benin as multipliers by providing technical advice and trainings on the legal provisions of the decentralisation framework (e.g. finance transfers, taxation, procurement, development planning). These CSOs in turn enable community-based organisations (CBOs) to function as effective watchdogs of public services. This includes participating in municipal development processes, promoting the inclusion of marginalised groups in local governance and influencing national decentralisation policies to include effective participation mechanisms. To ensure diversity, partner CSOs identify and empower a minimum number of organisations of people with disabilities as well as women and youth in their regions.
- Participatory monitoring and evaluation:** PDDC has implemented several initiatives to enable CBOs to participate in public planning and reporting processes. These include enhancing civil society's watchdog role in tax collection and public budgeting and spending. As a means to curb corruption CBOs participate in public hearings to monitor and evaluate municipal annual investment plans and budgets as well as in the supervision of public procurement.
- Capacity building of municipal administrations and its representatives:** Municipal authorities receive support in developing new management models for a performance-based, inclusive and transparent civil service to increase their accountability and improve citizens' access to information and participation.
- Enhancing gender equality in municipal institutions:** PDDC supports a network of female local councillors to mentor and empower 14 female councillors to perform in their elected office as citizens' representative and supervisors of the executive. Thereby they act as female role models to motivate other women to stand in local elections. The network facilitates peer coaching among female councilors, which focuses on the inclusion of women's interests and needs in local development plans, monitoring of the plans' implementation and on means to hold local government accountable for its budget spending. The programme trains the female councillors in requesting, preparing and holding public accountability hearings. By the end of 2018, 13 female councillors had organised a public hearing in their municipality.
- Improving multi-stakeholder collaboration to address local development challenges:** PDDC supports local multi-stakeholder dialogues and facilitates policy dialogue platforms for voters and their representatives, e.g. through youth fora and interactive radio broadcasts. To enhance synergies between sectoral policies at local level the programme develops frameworks, uniting representatives of different municipalities and civil society groups.

Achievements and Impact

Effective participatory monitoring and evaluation of public services

A toolbox developed by PDDC for participative monitoring and evaluation of municipal Annual Investment Plans (AIP) promotes citizen's control over resource allocation. It informs local CSOs and CBOs about the importance of the monitoring process and the procedures for developing an AIP. It highlights entry points for advocacy and citizen participation in the elaboration, implementation and evaluation of AIPs. Examples of actions undertaken by CSOs, CBOs and citizens to monitor the AIP include disclosure requests of municipal planning documents; meetings with municipal authorities to make recommendations; calls for municipal hearings and interpellations; visits to municipal construction sites and monitoring of public procurement processes.

In the municipality of Lokossa civil society stakeholders, accompanied by communal staff, are inspecting the construction site of the public market place which was budgeted for in the Annual Investment Plan.





In the so called youth fora policy dialogue between young people and their representatives takes place. These fora give the youth space to discuss local challenges and voice their opinion and needs.

In 2018, 158 CSOs and CBOs in 25 municipalities engaged in monitoring activities for the AIP, resulting in the implementation of all activities of the yearly development plan. All AIPs for 2019 included more measures to reduce discrimination of women, youth, people with disabilities and geographically isolated people, such as trainings for women or young people on entrepreneurship, the purchasing of public pirogues (boats) to allow for remote access to public services and the construction of wheelchair ramps.

PDDC also facilitated memorandums to improve the collaboration between civil society and municipalities to develop more harmonised processes for monitoring local public policies.

A more transparent and accountable local public sector

PDDC supported regular public hearings of partner municipalities with civil society participation. The hearings addressed issues like access to local public infrastructure and basic services, local own revenue mobilisation and the municipal budget. To encourage municipalities to regularly hold public hearings that meet quality criteria, PDDC carried out a competition among 25 partner municipalities for the best public hearing. Between 2016 and 2019 the ratings based on the quality criteria had increased, indicating that partner municipalities progressively apply them.

In 2018, all partner municipalities held at least one public hearing at their own expense; some also radio broadcasted them. During the hearings, local authorities and civil society actors engaged in dialogue and local authorities received direct feedback, helping them to prioritise actions and improve services. In one municipality a public hearing led to the establishment of a working group with civil society representatives to improve civil registry services. In another, communal water points were reappropriated by the community after citizens had pointed out their illegal privatisation to the mayor.

Active participation of persons with disabilities and increased attention to their rights

PDDC adopted a disability-inclusive approach in 2013. The programme provides trainings to local authorities on the rights of persons with disabilities and accessibility to public services. In 2018, PDDC facilitated a dialogue between 14 Disabled People's

Quality criteria for public hearings

Criteria for preparation and organisation: self-financing, reasonable budget, relevance of the topic, involvement of stakeholders, punctuality, tenue of the meeting, documentation, among others.

Criteria for inclusiveness: diversity of preparation committee, targeted invitation of women, people with disabilities and young people, quality of moderation, adapted communication materials, use of local languages, among others.

Criteria for accountability of elected representatives: number of elected representatives in attendance, capacity of mayor to answer questions, and others.

Criteria for evaluation and monitoring of the commitments: specific evaluation session, reporting of the meeting, public display of commitments, implementation of commitments, among others.

Organisations (DPOs), local authorities and representatives of the national ministry responsible for public service provision. Through dialogue platforms DPOs publicly outlined their demands and challenges when accessing local public infrastructure. PDDC also collaborated with DPOs at local level. 280 persons with disabilities in 25 municipalities participated in decision-making processes through evaluating municipal investment plans, visiting building sites and submitting alternative reports.

Capacity building and enhanced participation of persons with disabilities clearly impacted the AIPs of several municipalities. A variety of activities aimed at the inclusion of persons with disabilities were introduced: capacity building for inclusive local platforms for disaster and wildfire management; awareness raising for people with disabilities living in disaster risk areas; inclusion of youth with disabilities in livelihood training; accessible communal infrastructure such as market places and toilets; and the establishment of municipal committees on the rights of persons with disabilities and other marginalised groups.

A network of women councillors facilitates exchange and mutual learning for 14 female office holders. They act as role models for others to enhance women's political leadership.



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Improved access to public services

Citizen participation is a strong instrument for improving governance and subsequently more accessible and adequate public services. The participatory monitoring and evaluation of municipal AIP, for example, has led several local authorities to actually realise planned measures. The initiative of different CSOs and CBOs to monitor the implementation of specific activities and the dialogue with local authorities produced tangible changes: among them the construction of a primary school (following a civil society plea) and the reparation of a water bridge (following a citizen complaint).

Challenges

Political affiliation of CBO members: Local officials often distrust CBO members with a political affiliation, which prevents collaboration. To address this challenge PDDC conducts awareness raising among civil society actors on the importance of adopting a non-partisan stance and among local authorities on their role of providing access to information and engaging with civil society in decision-making processes. PDDC thereby uses public dialogue mechanisms, such as consultations and radio shows, and communication tools, such as WhatsApp groups, the App “communes 229” and information centres.

Empowerment of rights-holders: CBOs often feel that they do not have a say or lack expertise to effectively participate in local decision-making. It is essential to make CBOs aware of their crucial role as watchdogs, empower them to claim their rights and strengthen their negotiation skills.

Commitment of duty-bearers: Only a few local councillors participate in dialogue formats with DPOs as they do not see the added value. Some municipalities lack the funds to pay for transport for people with disabilities to participate in such fora

and many also do not include a budget for promoting rights of people with disabilities in their AIP.

Ownership and sustainability: Institutionalisation of citizen participation mechanisms remains a challenge. It is essential to promote local ownership of these mechanisms and to raise awareness on both sides – local authorities and civil society – about the mutual benefits to be gained from constructive citizen engagement and greater government transparency and accountability.

Lessons learned

An organised civil society is more effective in influencing local policies and voicing its concerns. Therefore, the umbrella organisation of CSOs has set up thematic working groups to refine sector-specific analyses, make recommendations and develop concerted advocacy. Besides supporting smaller and less professionalised CSOs and CBOs to acquire sectoral competences and benefit from the expertise of more elaborated organisations, the working groups also help to coordinate requests to local authorities and to speak with one voice at local and national level.

The rights of people with disabilities are more likely to be taken into account in municipalities that employ people with disabilities as municipal agents. Two municipalities, where staff with disability was in charge, established a committee dealing with the rights of people with disabilities, with representatives of DPOs and the municipality.

Written complaint mechanisms set up by some municipalities have not been actively embraced by citizens. Social media has become a popular channel for raising complaints. Using social media and digital tools to channel complaints and foster public accountability has potential but also bears challenges, such as privacy and data protection concerns.

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