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Beyond electoral democracy: Foreign aid and the challenge of deepening democracy in Benin

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Working Paper No. 2012/33

Beyond Electoral Democracy

Foreign Aid and the Challenge of Deepening
Democracy in Benin

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March 2012

Abstract

In the 1990s, analysts were almost unanimous in considering Benin to be one of the most important aid recipients among the newly democratizing African countries. After more than two decades of democratic practice, the country has clearly completed the phase of democratic transition. In this study, I argue that the main present-day political challenges in Benin are related both to the quality or *deepening* of democracy and to poverty reduction. Foreign aid has changed as donors have reoriented their assistance in order to target specific issues like the strengthening of civil society, accountability and the rule of law. Thanks to donors, success has been achieved in some sectors but it is far from certain that these positive experiences are enough to prevent political tensions between incumbents and opposition parties around issues of governance. Moreover, when it comes to more substantial aspects of democracy, such as enhancing accountability and fighting corruption, Benin still has a long way to go.

Keywords: Benin, foreign aid, democratic consolidation, accountability, corruption, elections

JEL classification: D72, F35, N47

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1 Introduction

In the 1990s, analysts were almost unanimous in considering Benin to be one of the most important aid recipients among the newly democratizing African countries. Some even stated that the way Benin was treated by international donors was comparable to that of former communist countries like Poland and East Germany (Couvrat 1991: 18). The reason for this particular attention was largely ideological: in an era dominated by the Western ‘democratic conditionality’ paradigm, Benin, one of the first African countries to democratize at the end of the Cold War, was considered to be ‘the laboratory of democratization in Africa’.

Policy makers then commonly agreed that, as Diamond (1992: 45) put it, ‘the global democratic revolution cannot be sustained without a global effort of assistance’. Foreign aid was considered particularly important for countries like Benin where the very survival of the democratic process hinged upon the resolution of the country’s severe economic problems. Aid was seen primarily as a way of helping to restore state capacities and to enable the government to fulfil critical tasks, such as paying the salaries of civil servants. In turn, newly elected governments were expected to avoid pervasive social unrest that could have led to political turmoil and democratic breakdown. Within the context of Benin, aid has generally taken the form of financial and budgetary assistance and was widely expected to act as a democratic catalyst for the country’s transformation process. Empirical evidence throughout the past decade has largely confirmed such an interpretation of events, therefore justifying the claim that foreign aid has been one of the main factors explaining Benin’s successful democratic experiment (Gazibo 2005).

Two decades have passed since the launching of Benin’s democratic transition. The country has held five presidential elections, and from a procedural perspective, democracy in Benin seems consolidated or at least, more robust than that of most of its African counterparts (Banégas 2003). Foreign aid, which has proven crucial during the early phases of the transition process, has since changed and now targets specific aspects of democratic consolidation.

My argument in this study is that while foreign aid been effective in certain areas such as elections and civil society promotion, its impact is weak in others, including the promotion of good governance, the rule of law, and accountability. This is because supporting and establishing institutions and procedures is much easier for donors than altering the deeper elements of political habits. This is particularly true in a country such as Benin where good governance rhetoric and policies are clearly at odds with their implementation due to political calculations by both incumbents and opposition parties. As a consequence, donors are frustrated with the lack of ‘democratic deepening’ and some are increasingly tempted to withdraw their aid. In the long run, without innovative policies aimed at improving government performance in key domains such as corruption, this vicious cycle may well lead to a further deterioration of the country’s democratic credentials.

The study is organized as follows: the first section provides the background of Benin’s democratization process and some brief methodological clarifications. The second section assesses foreign aid’s changing patterns in Benin by emphasizing two aspects: the co-ordination of donor interventions following the 2005 Paris declaration and the

growing importance of projects related to democracy promotion. Specifically, general budget support remains important and finances at least a quarter to a third of Benin's annual budget. Yet, since 2009, donors have become increasingly concerned about such support due to pervasive problems of governance and corruption in the Beninese public sector and to the perception that the policies or regulations put in place are more superficial than effective. The third section highlights the main realms related to governance and democratization in which donors intervene, such as institutions of accountability, political parties, public sector management, and support to civil society, by assessing donors' contribution and evaluating their impact. Within this section, I argue that thanks to donors, successes have been achieved in some sectors like elections, but that these positive experiences are not always sufficient to prevent political tensions. Moreover, when it comes to more substantial aspects of democracy like improving accountability and tackling corruption, Benin still has a long way to go. The concluding section deals with the quality of democracy in Benin and highlights the fact that overall, governance in Benin is still very weak. On one hand, important flaws remain that are difficult to dissipate; on the other hand, growing fatigue in the donor community threatens to reverse the gains the country has already achieved.

2 Background

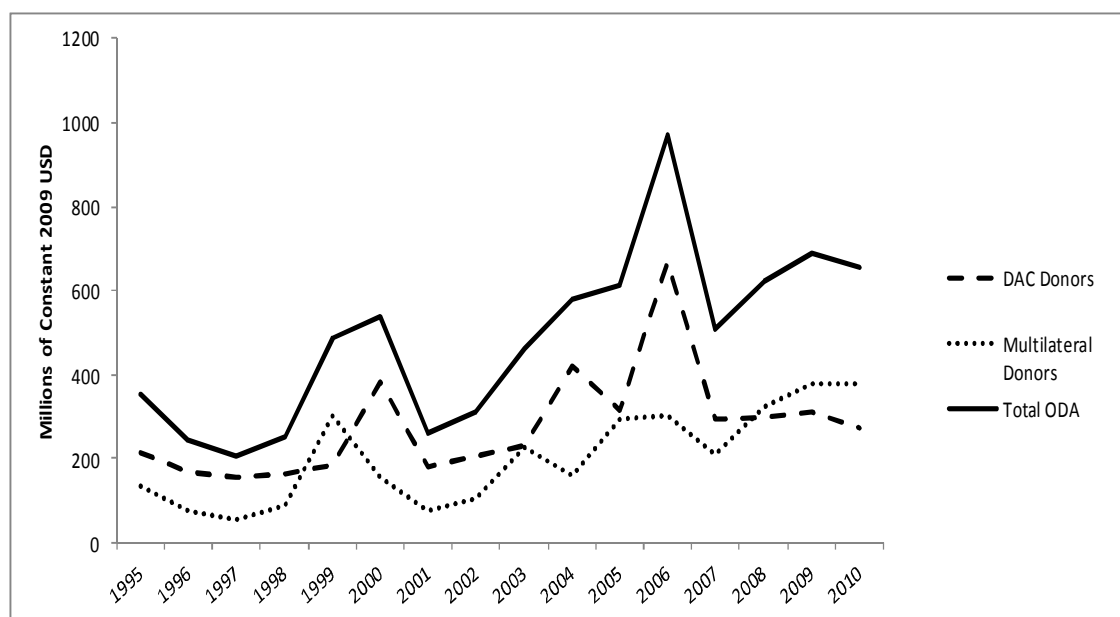
In this study, *aid* refers to official grants and technical co-operation offered by foreign countries and multilateral actors. Furthermore, for the purpose of this study, I concentrate on aid allocated to democracy and governance promotion in Benin, including efforts targeting economic governance. In addition to secondary data, I draw on information collected directly during field research conducted in Cotonou in June 2011 from various actors in foreign embassies, multilateral organizations and official administrations.

Africa traditionally has been one of the biggest recipients of Western development aid and democracy assistance. In the early 1990s, a time when many African countries were engaged in democratic experiments, foreign aid averaged nearly 8 per cent of their gross national income (GNI), compared to 0.7 per cent for Asia, 1.3 per cent for the Middle East and North Africa, and 0.4 per cent for Latin America (Lancaster 1999).¹ In Benin, foreign aid has fluctuated over time (see Figure 1), but represented an average of 9.3 per cent of the GNI from 2000 to 2008. Notwithstanding, the role aid providers may have played in the consolidation of these fledgling democracies remains poorly understood, partly because of the traditional over-emphasis in the democratization literature on domestic factors influencing the directions and the outcome of transition processes (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986).

Benin is considered an archetype of African democratization, having been the first African country to undergo a democratic transition within the context of the 'third wave' of democracy. This transition was triggered by two parallel developments. First, the collapse of single-party communist rule in Eastern Europe significantly discredited the existence of the single party and the Marxist-oriented political system established following the 1972 coup d'état, led by the then Major Mathieu Kérékou. Second, the prospect of bankruptcy loomed large on the horizon of the Beninese state. By 1989 most

¹ This includes non-political aid as well as specific democracy assistance.

Figure 1: Evolution of ODA commitments from DAC donors and multilaterals (US\$ million, constant 2009)



Source: Author's calculations from OECD Creditor Reporting System Database.

public companies had been closed down, and the Beninese government found itself confronted with a negative growth rate of -2.7 per cent and an overwhelming debt of 58.8 billion CFA Francs to the West African Central Bank (Dagba et al. 1996: 7-8).²

On the recommendation of the IMF and the World Bank, Benin then adopted a structural adjustment programme (SAP) and implemented severe austerity measures in areas such as health, education and public administration. As a result, an increasingly organized and vocal civil society, comprised especially of students and civil servants, emerged and launched wide-reaching mass mobilizations pressuring for economic change and political liberalization.

In February 1990, when the Beninese government reluctantly agreed to organize a 'National Conference', Benin was set to become what is widely known as 'the laboratory of democratization in Africa'. Participants from all sectors of Benin's society, including not only students and civil servants but also peasants, opposition opinion leaders, and army officers, gathered in the capital Cotonou to discuss the future of their country in what has sometimes been dubbed 'a civilian coup d'état', an event that completely reshaped the country's political landscape.

The conference launched a one-year transition period in which a new prime minister, Nicephore Soglo, was appointed and a High Council acting as a temporary National Assembly was created. President Kérékou was stripped of most of his powers and remained only symbolically at the head of government. In 1991 Benin succeeded in holding its first free and fair election, which resulted in a peaceful power transfer from Kérékou to the democratically elected Soglo.

² This is equivalent to US\$110 million based on today's exchange rate.

One of the biggest challenges the new regime had to tackle was the country's disastrous economic situation. Improvements in the country's economic performance were critical to the survival of Benin's fledgling democracy, particularly in the early stages of the transition process (Gazibo 2005; see also Magnusson 2001). This economic performance, in turn, would have been impossible without the high levels of foreign aid that Benin received during the first years of its democratic transition. First, this aid helped the new regime gain social peace, avoid instability, and prevent the rise of a non-democratic outcome, such as a military coup or a popular uprising. Second, such support contributed to solidifying the internal cohesion of Benin's political and civil society and their confidence in the democratic process. Since then, the political landscape has changed. After only one term, President Soglo was defeated in 1996 by the former dictator, Mathieu Kérékou, who won a second term in 2001. Neither Kérékou nor Soglo were part of the 2007 elections due to the constitutional provision that presidents can only serve two terms and cannot be over 70 years-old. Instead, Thomas Yayi Boni was elected president in 2007 and received a second mandate in 2011.

While the biggest challenge to democratic sustainability during the 1990s were basic economic functions (wages, bursaries, basic state operations etc.), Benin faces different challenges today. Even though the international community has never stopped its funding flow, donors have started voicing criticism regarding the country's flagrant level of corruption and the government's mismanagement of public resources—a problem that became especially intensified during former President Kérékou's second term (2001-07). In addition, even though Benin is considered to have a relatively robust democracy after several electoral cycles, it is clear that several issues in the political realm must be addressed if the country is to move beyond mere electoral formalism. The fact that since 2001 donors have voiced concerns about budget support (e.g. Denmark; the Netherlands) or have even withdrawn aid (e.g. Denmark) may add to these problems. Unless Benin devises new funding strategies, crises such as the pervasive strikes of public administration employees in 2010-11 may well become recurrent and potentially very destabilizing events. The next section deals in greater depth with the adaptation of the donor community to the changing reality in Benin, focusing in particular on the implications of aid volatility and changing ideas about aid in the donor community.

3 Assessing foreign aid and its changing patterns in Benin

The bilateral contributions of the OECD members, multilateral contribution of the EU and the main other organizations form the lion's share of foreign aid to Benin. In addition, however, Benin has a variety of other non-traditional partners such as the Arab States, Brazil, China and India. Bilateral and multilateral donors continue to account for most of the aid Benin receives. In addition, they are the key providers of aid targeted at governance and democratization issues.

3.1 The donor community

Major bilateral donors

In 2009, the most important bilateral donor to Benin was the United States with US\$59 million in total net ODA. However, since 2006 this aid focuses solely on education and

health. USAID stopped its good governance programme in Benin in 2004 after four years of experimentation, partly because of a lack of results and partly because of disenchantment with the way the Beninese government (mis)managed US development assistance. Other major bilateral donors that still focus on governance issues are Denmark (US\$51.4 million), France (US\$50.4 million), Germany (US\$43.1 million) and the Netherlands (US\$42 million). Together their engagement accounts for around 75 per cent of total net ODA from bilateral donors.

However, such a classification of Benin's major bilateral donors is incomplete for several reasons. First, a long-term view reveals that the classification changes over time. Traditionally, France has been Benin's major donor for most of the period under study. Second, most donors do not have stable average contributions because their involvement varies depending on the political conditions and agendas existing in the country. In electoral periods or moments of important reforms that are difficult to achieve without huge external support, significant one-time donations may be provided by specific countries. For example, while France is Benin's biggest traditional, bilateral donor, it provided a smaller financial contribution to the creation of the new electronic, permanent electoral list, known as the Liste Électorale Permanente Informatisée (LEPI) from 2008 to 2010 than Belgium, the Netherlands, Spain, Luxemburg, Switzerland or Japan. Third, smaller donors like the Netherlands, Sweden, Belgium, and Denmark have been for some years among Benin's biggest donors if their aid is calculated proportionally to their GDP. More importantly, a significant part of their assistance is dedicated to democracy and governance issues.

Finally, a number of trends are observable during the period under study. Overall, foreign aid tended to decline from 2001 to 2003 following President Kérékou's disputed election for a second term, which provoked a very difficult political situation. Yet, foreign aid regained its momentum in 2006 as a result of two main events. The first event was the election in 2006 of Thomas Yayi Boni as the new head of state. He subsequently launched in 2007 a strong anti-corruption and good governance crusade.³ The second event was the modernization in 2010 of the electoral system via the creation of a more rigorous and exhaustive electronic electoral list, which required a substantial input of resources. More recently, this resurgence in bilateral aid has waned in 2010 and 2011 due to Benin's poor performance with regards to the anti-corruption campaign and other governance issues.

Major multilateral donors

The major multilateral donor to Benin is the EU, disbursing US\$146.6 million in net ODA in 2009 mainly through the European Development Fund (EDF).⁴ Within the current framework of the 10th EDF, aid concentrates mainly on governance and local development, as well as on infrastructure and regional communications. The EU works to strengthen the Beninese government as a political, economic, social, financial and judicial regulator, particularly in public finance and justice. Furthermore, aid is intended to help improve infrastructure, especially the maintenance of the primary regional road network and the development of rural transport. The EU also supports the government's

³ Interview with Bertin Aizonou, deputy to the secretary in charge of the monitoring of the economic and financial programmes, Ministry of Finance.

⁴ EC Strategy Paper 2008–13.

http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/scanned_bj_csp10_fr.pdf

macroeconomic reform programme via general budget support. Additional aid targets competitiveness, social cohesion, the environment and civil society, with a total commitment of €340.2 million under the 10th EDF to address these priorities.

As seen in Table 1, other major multilateral donors are the World Bank's International Development Association (IDA) and the African Development Bank's African Development Fund (AfDF). These donors committed US\$153 million and US\$65 million in 2010, respectively, which accounts for almost 60 per cent of total multilateral aid commitments in that year.

Table 1: ODA from key multilateral donors (US\$ million, constant 2009)

Multilateral donor	1995-2000	2001-06	2007-10
AfDF	131.13	182.44	137.45
EU Institutions	347.81	427.21	435.43
GAVI	----	----	18.34
GEF	----	6.75	13.53
Global Fund	----	55.75	118.24
IDA	263.66	383.02	418.29
IFAD	51.12	26.49	17.92
IMF (Concessional Trust Funds)	12.97	40.39	51.49
UNAIDS	0.00	0.74	1.59
UNDP	4.75	10.23	19.85
UNFPA	----	16.66	10.81
UNICEF	2.87	20.82	22.34
Total	814.32	1170.50	1265.28

Source: Author's calculations from the OECD Creditor Reporting System Database.

Not all multilateral organizations are involved in democracy promotion programmes in Benin. Some, like UNICEF, UNHCR or WFP prefer working on social and economic issues that are connected to many aspects of governance. The African Development Fund (AfDF) for example focuses on a relatively small set of strategic priorities like promoting economic growth, improving infrastructure, governance and regional integration. Of these objectives, infrastructure has received the most attention, with more than a quarter of the resources being allocated to this specific goal. Other priorities in Benin are poverty reduction through rural and agricultural development and developing human resources. To achieve these goals, nine operations worth 83 million unit of accounts (UA) were financed by the AfDF in 2009.⁵ The two major pillars of the AfDF's assistance strategy are diversifying production and broadening access to basic social services. A third pillar, support to reform and good governance, involves contributing to budget support programmes as well as strengthening the capacities of the public administration, Parliament and the Supreme Court.⁶

⁵ UA is the official currency unit of the African Development Bank. As of June 2011, 1 UA was equivalent to US\$1.55.

⁶ AfDF Country Strategy Paper 2005–11: <http://www.afdb.org/en/countries/west-africa/benin/>

With regards to IDA, as of April 2010, assistance mainly focuses on economic reform, human development, infrastructure improvement, private sector growth, rural development and the environment, with a total commitment of US\$298 million.⁷ In 2009, IDA also provided US\$30 million in support to the implementation of the Strategy for Growth and Poverty Reduction of the Government of Benin, a strategy that includes important governance aspects.

As seen in Figure 1, multilateral donors have followed bilateral donors and have tended to adapt their level of aid flows to Benin's changing political climate. Even though multilateral aid is officially apolitical and unconditional, political uncertainties exert an important impact on its allocation. For instance, multilateral aid soared from 2007 to 2009 largely because donors became encouraged by President Yayi Boni's commitment to combat poor governance and corruption.⁸

Non-traditional donors

Engagement from non-traditional donors is difficult to quantify, although estimates from the AidData database indicate that such donors have committed approximately US\$60 million to Benin between 1990 and 2010. These commitments exclude resources from China. Indeed, figures of China's aid disbursements to Africa remain vague, especially given the absence of a central aid agency.⁹ In addition, the lack of general time series data on aid flows and the non-transparent nature of Chinese loans concluded in accordance with China's engagement policy of 'mutual respect' complicate the process of defining, calculating and monitoring China's ODA to the African continent.¹⁰ According to information provided by official embassy sources, China has spent more than FCFA 100 billion since 1972 in support of economic co-operation projects in Benin.¹¹ These projects have focused on government assistance, human resources, rural and agricultural development, industry and public construction, public health, energy, telecommunications and commerce. China is not at all involved in governance or pro-democracy programmes and rarely provides general budget support.¹²

In addition, the last decade has witnessed the arrival of many other partners in Benin, among which India, Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi, Kuwait and Brazil are the most visible.¹³ But compared to the more traditional partners, their donor relations are very different. India's presence is limited to commercial aspects and to the railways sector. Arab agencies participate in a number of sectors and co-operation projects with DAC and multilateral donors. Saudi Arabia, Abu Dhabi and Kuwait specifically intervene in the

⁷ IDA official webpage.

<http://web.worldbank.org/external/default/main?menuPK=322671&pagePK=141155&piPK=141124&theSitePK=322639>

⁸ Interview: Isidore Agboko, assistant to the UNDP representative in Benin, in charge of election issues.

⁹ See, however, the forum on China-Africa co-operation (FOCAC).

¹⁰ UK development agency, DFID:

<http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http://www.dfid.gov.uk/pubs/files/china-dev-africa-sum.pdf>

¹¹ Republic of China, Embassy to Benin:

<http://bj.china-embassy.org/fra/zbqx/t217656.htm>.

¹² Interview with Julien Yao, Chief of the Benin-Chinese Economic and Commercial Development Centre, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

¹³ <http://www.africaneconomicoutlook.org/fr/countries/west-africa/benin/>

infrastructure (roads, buildings) sector. Brazil has a rather symbolic attraction to Benin because the ancestors of most of the Afro-Brazilian population are believed to have been deported from this country.

Non-traditional donors do not seem to challenge traditional donors in Benin on issues of governance and democracy promotion, and they do not hinder Western efforts for at least three reasons. First, their contribution is low compared to that of the traditional donors. Second, most of them do not interfere in the country's political matters. Third, Benin does not experience severe and internationally polarizing political deadlocks like countries such as Zimbabwe or Sudan. Issues that are generally divisive elsewhere, like minority rights, extreme oppression of the media or exclusion of opposition parties from competition, are not problematic in a truly liberalized country like Benin.¹⁴ Sometimes donors even seem sceptical of the opposition's criticism of the incumbent regime, as was the case during the 2011 elections, when opposition leaders denounced as unfair what most observers considered a sufficiently genuine process.¹⁵

3.2 The changing pattern of foreign aid to Benin: new framework and targeted aid

Recently, aid to Benin has taken a number of new orientations due to both systemic and internal factors. On the systemic level, a new framework appeared with the 2005 Paris Declaration, which designed a new roadmap to improve the effectiveness of aid. According to this framework, 'it is now the norm for aid recipients to forge their own national development strategies with their parliaments and electorates (ownership); for donors to support these strategies (alignment) and work to streamline their efforts in-country (harmonization); for development policies to be directed to achieving clear goals and for progress towards these goals to be monitored (results); and for donors and recipients alike to be jointly responsible for achieving these goals (mutual accountability)'.¹⁶

These principles have clearly impacted both on donors' strategies and on the way Benin's government now deals with governance issues. First instance, donors' strategies are better co-ordinated, generally by UNDP or between countries that share the same vision or intervene on similar issues, such as the Netherlands and Denmark on initiatives aimed at strengthening civil society and the judiciary. In addition, as a direct response to donors' principles of *alignment* and *results*, the Beninese government has put several policies and institutional reforms related to the promotion of democracy and governance on the agenda with respect to, for example, corruption, government contracts, the state inspection office, and elections. In the same vein, the *ownership* principle has paved the way for other initiatives, such as the High Commissariat for Concerted Governance. The *mutual accountability* principle led to the institutionalization of periodic reviews of the advancement of Benin's policies, especially those related to the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP).

In addition, the Paris Declaration stated that 'the effectiveness of aid is reduced when there are too many duplicating initiatives, especially at country and sector levels. We

¹⁴ Even though as we will see below, President Boni has not always been media-friendly.

¹⁵ This became clear during interviews conducted in Cotonou, Benin in June 2011 with the French Ambassador and officials at agencies such as the UNDP.

¹⁶ http://www.oecd.org/document/18/0,3343,en_2649_3236398_35401554_1_1_1_1,00.html

will reduce the fragmentation of aid by improving the complementarity of donors' efforts and the division of labour among donors, including through improved allocation of resources within sectors, within countries, and across countries'. This had an impact on donors' actions with many of them redirecting their aid toward targeted actions where success is easy to measure and increasing efforts to co-ordinate their actions. For example, donors operating in Benin have implemented a code of conduct aimed at ensuring they follow the Paris Declaration principles, even if it was judged relatively non-functional in 2010. However, compared to 2005 and 2007, donors have more recently made greater effort to harmonize their interventions, in particular with regard to joint missions.¹⁷

4 Donors and democracy promotion in Benin

With regards to democracy promotion, donors are engaged in multiple areas of intervention. Overall, democracy assistance from key donors totaled approximately US\$147 million between 2001-09 (Table 2). Since it is not possible to offer an exhaustive overview of these interventions, I focus here on the five most significant domains related to democracy promotion: central government institutions, civil society, political parties and elections, and accountability.

Table 2: Matrix of donors on democracy support (commitments in millions of US\$)

Democracy, rule of law, decentralization		
Financial partners	1999-2003*	2001-09**
AfDB		3,83
Belgium		14,60
Canada	6,20	
China		4,75
CIDA		2,17
Denmark	3,00	9,40
EC	2,70	37,00
France	5,90	5,94
Germany	11,00	19,50
Netherlands	4,90	8,00
Switzerland	8,40	0,82
UNDP	13,40	0,98
UNICEF	8,40	
USAID	11,80	58,38
WB	0,40	
TOTAL	76,10	146,94

Sources: *Benin-Communauté Européenne: Document de Stratégie de Co-opération et Programme Indicatif pour la Période 2002-2007: 5.

http://ec.europa.eu/development/center/repository/scanned_bj_csp_fr.pdf

** Benin-Communauté européenne: Document de Stratégie de Co-opération et Programme Indicatif National pour la Période 2008-2013: 126.

http://ec.europa.eu/development/center/repository/scanned_tg_cps10_fr.pdf

¹⁷ Personal communication with Jean Barbé, chief of the social and governance section, EU delegation, Cotonou, Benin, July 2011.

4.1 Restoring state capacity via support to central institutions

In the first decade of the democratic process, strengthening central institutions in Africa was rarely on donors' agendas because the state was considered a problem rather than an ally in the struggle for more open polities. However, support to strengthen central institutions has been a key aspect of general budget support and the Paris Declaration. Donors increasingly realized that democracy could hardly survive in a context of state failure or institutional breakdown. Support to central institutions targets the main institutions involved directly in human rights, promotion of good governance and the separation of powers. The European Union's 9th and 10th EDF for example explicitly mentions support for the Executive branch, the National Assembly, the judicial system and the recently created High Commission for Concerted Governance among its priorities, alongside its more general democracy promotion objectives.

Support to the Executive branch is channelled mainly through general budget assistance. While budget support to Benin is predominantly provided by the European Union and France, who are the biggest and most consistent partners, other general budget support contributors include the African Development Fund, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, the IMF, Ireland, Japan, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland, and the World Bank's IDA.

The provision of budget support has enabled Benin's central institutions to become sufficiently strong to avoid a democratic breakdown. By allowing the government to pay its civil servants and provide students with bursaries, budget support has helped avoid mass mobilizations and social instability (see Gazibo 2005). In addition, donors also provide financial and technical assistance to the Executive in order to help formulate regulations in specific domains like the electoral, and mechanisms of accountability.¹⁸

However, Benin has become heavily dependent on foreign aid. According to the Director of the preparation of state budget, bilateral and multilateral partners finance most of the country's development projects as well as most of the vital political, economic and social reforms the government undertakes. In fact, the total amount of foreign aid is roughly equivalent to the total amount of wages paid to the country's civil servants.¹⁹ Moreover, as seen in Figure 2, budget support has been volatile and depends on the political climate in the country. Donors such as Switzerland have either considerably reduced or completely abandoned direct financial aid to the government because they consider general budget support fungible and its impact difficult to measure.

¹⁸ Interview with Isidore Agbokou, UNDP.

¹⁹ Interview with Toussaint Adjaho, Director of the preparation of state budget, Ministry of Finance, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

Figure 2: Evolution of general budget support to Benin (US\$ million, constant 2000)



Source: Constructed from data from AidData.org.

In the area of democracy assistance, a great deal of support is directed at the National Assembly which, paradoxically, is not involved in aid allocation procedures.²⁰ For example, donors such as the UNDP and the Netherlands provide funds for periodic training programmes. In 2007, the UNDP launched a one-year training programme for members of parliament on several aspects of parliamentary duty. In particular, the training programme covered issues such as the country's main legal regulations, the complexities and procedures leading to the elaboration of the budget, the role of the parliament vis-à-vis the government, and the MPs' duties as representatives of the people.²¹ The Netherlands initially just supported MPs on the budget committee but later extended their support to all parliamentarians. This assistance was provided in co-ordination with the African Capacity Building Foundation of the World Bank and other partners like Denmark and included training programmes, information and equipment.²² The same kind of support has been provided by Denmark in order to boost MPs' capacity to better handle their tasks.²³ Collectively, these programmes became necessary for parliament to adequately assume its role given that, as many observers noticed, the MPs elected during the last elections were less competent than the first democratically elected MPs in 1991.²⁴

In theory, this type of aid can strengthen the capacities of parliament. Endowing MPs with the ability to promote rights, control the government and initiate the necessary regulations are essential components of a functioning separation of powers and democratic consolidation. However, donors are confronted with two types of problems related to this kind of support. First, they not only find it difficult to get the MPs

²⁰ Interview: Joseph Gnonlonfoun, former MP and 2011 President of the Autonomous National Electoral Commission, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

²¹ Interview: Isidore Agbokou, UNDP.

²² Interview: Francis Laleye, Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

²³ Interview: Sylvain Degbé, Embassy of Denmark, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

²⁴ Interview: Joseph Gnonlonfoun, former MP and 2011 President of the Autonomous National Electoral Commission, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

interested and involved in these training programmes, but they also realize that despite capacity-building workshops, MPs seldom manage to put aside political differences with respect to issues discussed in parliament. Second, there is a high level of rotation in the Beninese Parliament across elections and consequently, the training programmes have to be repeated frequently. For this reason, most donors have stopped targeting MPs and have concentrated instead on the more stable administrative and technical staff of the parliament.

Donors' aid and influence can also be observed with regard to the creation and support of the High Commission for Concerted Governance. The very creation of this institution in 2007, following the election of Yayi Boni, was in part a response to donors' expectations. In particular, it echoes one of the Paris Declaration's principles—that of ownership—according to which aid recipients should outline their national development strategies with their parliaments and electorates. Some donors are sceptical about the usefulness of the institution, either because they do not clearly understand what its tasks are or because they consider it a duplication of other institutions. However, the High Commission, an institution under the direct supervision of the presidency, is potentially an interesting tool given its multiple functions. It is (1) a tool of political mediation during electoral crises; (2) an instrument for the empowerment of civil society via the creation of national and local 'peace infrastructures';²⁵ (3) an institution which helps the reaching of a consensus on future constitutional reform; and (4) an institution involved in decentralization issues by providing mediation between the local stakeholders and by informing and encouraging the population to take part in local issues. This is why some donors, particularly the UNDP but also France, the US, and the Netherlands, are also involved.²⁶

Many other institutions also benefit from foreign support to central institutions. Two examples are the ombudsman, an institution that offers conciliation between citizens and the state; and the high authority in charge of communication, radio and TV, an institution which is particularly important when it comes to guaranteeing political parties equal access to state media during elections.

4.2 Empowering civil society

Civil society is very active in Benin. Its historical roots can roughly be schematized along three periods: From 1960 to 1972, Benin had the most vibrant civil society in francophone Africa, and unions and other associations of different types were very active on the political stage. For example, the first military intervention led by General Christophe Soglo was carried out following mass mobilization by civil society demanding a coup. From 1972 to 1990, the Marxist regime incorporated all the groups and associations as representatives of various sections of society into the structures of the single party. In 1989, the formerly incorporated organizations, in particular the unions and the students, began organizing mass protests asking for political and economic reforms (Banégas 1995; Gazibo 2005). They were the main driving force behind Benin's democratic opening. Except for the communist party, political parties were non-existent and were created only after the 1991 national conference. Since then,

²⁵ These peace infrastructures play mediation roles and are composed of representatives coming from roughly 150 NGOs.

²⁶ Interview with Isidore Agbokou, UNDP, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

civil society organizations have continued to flourish and they continue to receive generous attention from donors as a main component of their democracy, governance and rule of law programmes.

Like many African countries that opened up their political regime in the 1990s, Benin's political landscape features a plethora of NGOs, many of which function only as a result of foreign donors' subsidies. The Netherlands, for example, provides financial and technical support to 'Social Watch', an initiative that groups together over 150 NGOs in Benin in an attempt to provide those organizations with the skills needed to build human capacities, carry out their programmes, fight corruption and improve their expertise on governance issues. The creation of peace infrastructures deserves particular mention as one of the most significant contributions of such aid. In co-ordination with Social Watch, they act as a type of ombudsman bureau of two to three persons working to facilitate political and social conciliation in order to improve governance at the local and national levels.²⁷

The media constitutes another important sector for donor support. While Benin used to have only one state TV and one radio station before political liberalization, there are now five private TV channels, more than ten radio stations in Cotonou, numerous rural and commercial radio stations and several dozen newspapers. In addition, there are at least four big media groupings: L'Union des Professionnels des Media du Bénin, la Maison des Media du Bénin, l'Observatoire de la Déontologie et de l'Éthique dans les Media and l'Association des Patrons de Presse.

Most of the media are relatively independent from political actors. Yet, journalists rarely have a diploma, or even attend a single journalism course, and this clearly has a negative impact on their professionalism as well as their potential contribution to democratic consolidation.²⁸ For these reasons, some donors attribute special attention to the media sector. This is the case of Denmark's Programme for Support to Democracy, Equality and Gender (PADEG), an important component of which is to provide technical training to employees of the various media groupings.²⁹

Freedom of the press generally is respected in Benin. However, it is rather ironic that this fundamental right generally was better upheld during the presidency of the former dictator, General Mathieu Kérékou's (1996-2006) than during the civilian President Yayi Boni. No journalist was ever jailed during Kérékou's two terms, and writers were not persecuted for their work, regardless of how critical they may have been. By contrast, many journalists have been sued and jailed under Yayi Boni, who seems less tolerant towards accusations of corruption and authoritarian tendencies. Nonetheless, it is not clear whether and to what degree media freedoms are really deteriorating. Journalists are often sued because of the usually unverified and accusatory tone and content of most newspapers, which is a consequence of journalists' lack of professionalism. This is why the media is battling for a law on the depenalization of press offences.³⁰ However, no donors have been explicitly involved in advocating for this law.

²⁷ Interview with Francis Laleyé, Embassy of the Netherlands, Cotonou, Bénin, June 2011.

²⁸ Interview with Joel Ahofodji, Communication specialist, UNDP-Benin, Cotonou, Bénin, June 2011.

²⁹ Interview with Sylvain Degbé, Danish co-operation, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

³⁰ Interview with Joel Ahofodji, communication specialist, UNDP, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

Finally, donors support civil society in two other sectors: the rural population and the unions. Benin features a variety of unions organized in several ideological groupings, each of which receives a percentage of the two hundred million CFA Francs in annual subsidies from the government. Initially, this pluralism originated in 1990 when the former Federation of Unions, the National Union of the Syndicates of Benin (UNSTB), announced its separation from the single party. Progressively, many of its members quit to form new unions until, twenty years later, seven main groupings more or less linked to the political parties that populate Benin's political landscape. The most involved in politics is the Centrale des Syndicats des Travailleurs du Benin (CSTB), a small but very vocal organization with a communist orientation and strong links to the Communist Party. At times, donors such as the International Labour organization (ILO), the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, the UNDP, and Denmark support these unions on issues related to employment and workers' rights.³¹

Yet, donor relations with the unions may be strained, particularly when unions mobilize or strike in order to obtain wage increases. In these situations, donors like the IMF, the World Bank and the West African Economic and Monetary Union risk being used by Benin's government to intervene in the debate when unions' demands are considered perilous to the economic and financial capacities of the central state or when they threaten to jeopardize Benin's international commitments. For example, in June 2011, a portion of the country's civil servants went on strike to demand a wage increase similar to the one Benin's government had previously conceded to the personnel of the Finance Ministry after more than a year of continuous strikes. Since Benin's internal and external revenues had been severely crippled by those strikes, the World Bank then clearly stated that another concession of this kind was not feasible and would damage the economic programme supported by donors. President Yayi Boni quickly adopted the argument to explain why he would not respond positively to the unions' demands.³²

4.3 Securing elections

Elections represent the main domain in which foreign aid has been crucial in helping Benin maintain and consolidate its democracy. It is generally accepted from a procedural-minimalist perspective that holding free and fair elections at regular intervals constitutes the main criterion according to which a country is considered democratic. Since the beginning of its democratic experiment in 1991, Benin has held legislative and presidential elections on a regular basis. At the presidential level, an incumbent has been defeated twice (Kérékou in 1991 and Soglo in 1996) and one (Kérékou in 2007) has respected the constitutional two-term limitation and left office after his second term. Aside from Ghana and Mali, few other West African countries have such a positive record.

In Benin, elections are organized by the Autonomous National Electoral Commission (CENA). The CENA was created in 1994 as an autonomous body by the National Assembly after a fierce battle with President Soglo who tried to maintain its traditional control over electoral matters. But even though the Commission is autonomous and prepares its own budget, it is the government that ultimately supplies budget resources.

³¹ Interview with Marcel Degla Vodougnon, UNSTB, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

³² After one month of strikes, the government accepted a 20 per cent increase from 2011 to 2014.

Foreign aid is sometimes symbolic rather than financial. For example, donors have always insisted on the Finance Ministry providing the needed funds to the CENA. They know only too well that without foreign pressure elections are usually postponed or never held by incumbent governments who starve and paralyse their electoral body. According to Joseph Gnonlonfoun, President of the 2011 CENA and also the proposer of the law which created the electoral commission in 1994, elections are one of the rare domains in which donors have rarely conditioned their aid to Benin since 1990.³³ Some donors such as the US or the Netherlands even deliberately make public announcements about their commitment so that the Beninese government has no choice other than to get involved.

As for the financial side, donors have always reacted positively when requested to help subsidize elections in Benin. Their involvement was important in the 2001 elections won by incumbent President Kérékou who was seeking a second and final constitutional term. Two examples of subsequent and critical electoral moments in recent Beninese history serve to demonstrate that point. First, donor contributions were vital for the 2007 presidential election. This was one of the most important tests for the consolidation of Benin's democracy because it was the first time since 1990 that a President was expected to leave office after two constitutional terms. For many stakeholders, the lack of commitment of the government to transfer the funds requested by the CENA was a sign that President Kérékou was not ready to quit. The Netherlands was the first country to announce an important financial contribution to the electoral commission. Given the decentralized nature of the Netherland's aid allocation procedures, it took roughly a month from the announcement (December) to the disbursement (January). This created a positive trend, as other donors (USAID, Denmark, Switzerland, France and the UNDP in particular) soon followed.³⁴ As a result, the government was no longer in a position to block the preparation of the elections. Thus, due to the donors' symbolic and financial involvement, the CENA's members were finally appointed and were able to organize the presidential and legislative elections in a timely manner.³⁵

Second, donors have played a crucial role in the preparation and holding of the 2011 presidential and legislative elections. These elections were characterized by a very important institutional innovation, the creation of a permanent informatized electoral list, known as the Liste Électorale Permanente Informatisée (LEPI). In addition to the Beninese government's contribution of US\$19.5 million for the preparation of the list, donors invested approximately US\$31 million (see Table 3). These resources funded the Project to Support Electoral Reform (PAREL), which was responsible for the preparation of the LEPI.³⁶ In addition, during that period, donors and the Beninese government convened every ten days to evaluate the progress made in preparing for the elections and the problems that needed to be solved.³⁷

³³ Interview with Joseph Gnonlonfoun, President (2011) of the National Electoral Commission (CENA), Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

³⁴ Interview: Francis Laleyé, Embassy of the Netherlands, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

³⁵ For each election, a series of new commission members are appointed whose mandate then ceases after the election.

³⁶ Interview with Mr Kacou Assokpé, Director, PAREL, Cotonou, Bénin, June 2011.

³⁷ Ibid.

Table 3: Main donor contributions to the new electoral list project, 2009-11 (US\$)

European Union	12,695,873.12
The Netherlands	4,557,793.23
Denmark	3,520,013.77
Belgium	3,012,048.19
Swiss	2,006,766.50
UNDP	1,100,987.78
Japan	1,000,000.00
Luxemburg	651,668.00
France	577,200.58
Finland	525,624.18
Germany	484,726.23
Spain	140,000.00
Austria	3,012.05

Source : République du Bénin, PAREL, Rapport d'Exécution du Projet de Réalisation de la Liste Électorale Informatisée (LEPI), May 2011: 25-6.

Many political controversies erupted around this electoral list since opposition parties, wary of manipulation and fraud, accused the government of having deliberately avoided the inscription on the list of half a million voters, who were presumably favourable to the opposition. Just days before the elections, another round of voter identification was initiated. President Yayi Boni admitted these deficiencies, but neither he nor members of the donor community thought that they were deliberate.³⁸ Instead, donors consider that the list is a very important step toward fairer elections and that the new list represented clear progress compared to previous elections.³⁹

Donors also supported the CENA during the 2011 presidential and legislative elections under the umbrella of the UNDP. Given the organization's expertise in election monitoring and the fear that the money could have been misused if given directly to the government or even to the electoral commission, donors put their contributions in a common fund and authorized the UNDP to decide of its destination in co-ordination with the commission.⁴⁰ Although their procedures were sometimes considered excessively complicated and indicated a degree of mistrust of the government, the overall contribution of donors to the organization of the last elections is clearly praiseworthy.⁴¹

During the 2011 elections, President Yayi Boni was re-elected after only one round, and his supporters organized in the Cowry Forces for an Emerging Benin (FCBE) won 49 of the 83 seats of the National Assembly.⁴² This was the first time in twenty years of Benin's democratic experiment that a President was elected so easily. It was also the

³⁸ Interviews with Kacou Assokpé (PAREL), Isidore Agbokou (UNDP), and Francis Laleyé (Holland), Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

³⁹ Interview with Hervé Besancenot, French Ambassador, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁴⁰ Interview with Isidore Agbokou (UNDP), Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁴¹ Interview with Joseph Gnonlonfoun, President (2011) of the National Electoral Commission (CENA).

⁴² In addition, the Renaissance du Bénin (RB) of the former President Nicéphore Soglo joined the presidential majority in June.

first time that the main opposition leaders, irrespective of their ideological differences, coalesced in the Union Makes the Nation (UN) and unanimously supported the candidacy of the long-time opponent Adrien Houngbedji. Thus, one may raise legitimate doubts about the validity of the electoral outcome. However, most donors and members of the diplomatic community, including the French Ambassador, concluded that the election was credible. They, as well as many of Benin's citizens, believe that Yayi Boni won easily because the UN was counterproductive and was equivalent to 'the coalition of the 40 thieves united only because they were hungry and thirsty'.⁴³ In other words, the UN was seen by the electorate as an interest-driven coalition rather than a political project with the potential to respond to citizens' needs.

4.4 Building a more effective party system

This perceptual problem suggests that there is a deeper weakness within Benin's political party system. Observers often highlight the extreme fragmentation of Benin's political scene. As a civil servant working in the political department of the Ministry of Interior told me, no one has a precise idea of the number of political parties in the country. Since the law for registering parties is so liberal, parties are created and dismantled frequently depending on the political issues at stake. Many have a legal existence but few organize regular political activities or participate in elections. The last electoral cycle, however, witnessed the formation of four relatively big coalitions. In addition to the FCBE and the UN, which included the country's main political parties, there was also the Alliance G13 Baobab composed of independent MPs and the ABT coalition that supported the candidacy of Abdoulaye Bio Tchané.⁴⁴

Parties in Benin are portrayed as being exactly the opposite of 'classical' political parties (Lapalombara and Weiner 1966). They are not always permanent organizations, and those that have been around for a while look like the personal property of their 'founding father'. They are hardly present at the national and local levels and most of them look like interest groups that, rather than fighting for power, generally support a potential winner in exchange of spoils in case of victory. This phenomenon, described as 'political nomadism' by Banégas (2003), is best illustrated by the case of the Renaissance du Bénin (RB) coalition that supported former President Nicéphore Soglo. Before the elections, the RB supported the UN coalition but after the elections, it joined the President's FCBE. Rather than winning the electorate's support by designing convincing political and economic programmes, these parties generally specialize in vote buying and electoral clientelism (Banégas 1998).

As Joseph Gnonlonfoun, former MP in the 1990s and President of the 2011 National Electoral Commission bitterly concluded, parties in Benin have lost their ideological conviction since the first 1991 parliament. He stressed that even though the concepts of majority and opposition are legally defined, no party presents itself as the official opposition. When they oppose the president, their focus is rarely on programmatic political issues but rather on personal attacks in an attempt to garner political capital.⁴⁵ The result is a chaotic and constantly changing landscape of fleeting party alliances. For

⁴³ Phrase quoted from an informal discussion with a cab driver.

⁴⁴ In addition, four other parties, each of which has two MPs each, support the President in Parliament: Union pour le Bénin (UB); Alliance Amana; Alliance forces dans l'Unité (AFU); Alliance Cauri.

⁴⁵ Interview with Joseph Gnonlonfoun, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

all these reasons, the High Commissioner of the High Commission for Concerted Governance, M. Moïse Mensah, warned that the lack of competitive political parties is a critical weakness of Benin's democracy. More troubling is the general lack of legitimacy around political parties as a conduit for representation. This was most notable. It also explains the lack of legitimacy of political parties in Benin, a problem that was exemplified in the 2006 election of Thomas Yayi Boni as president when he managed to collect 75 per cent of the total votes cast even though he did not belong to a political party. During his electoral campaign, he even consciously chose to frame himself in terms of a technocrat rather than a politician (Mayrargue 2010: 85).

Donors are well aware of the problems that characterize Benin's parties and its party system as well as the consequences this vacuum may have on the consolidation of democracy. Yet, many are sceptical about supporting parties financially because, as a representative of one noted, 'a vast majority of Benin politicians are bandits and thieves who try desperately to be elected or support unconditionally the president in order to escape trials'.⁴⁶ The fact that Benin's main donor, the European Union, is almost absent regarding support to parties and instead prefers to concentrate on electoral issues is not accidental.⁴⁷ At the same time, foreign aid has sometimes had the unintended consequence of favouring the incumbents. For example, when USAID provided material and funds to help fight malaria, the Beninese government synchronized the distribution of this aid with the elections in order to garner votes.⁴⁸ Nonetheless, many donors finance seminars and training programmes for political parties, with the UNDP representing the donor most involved in such efforts. Its programmes revolve around several issues, but particular efforts are directed at projects focusing on leadership, accountability and policy-oriented politics.⁴⁹

4.5 Combating corruption and strengthening accountability

If there is a domain in which democratic consolidation in Benin faces huge challenges, it is certainly with regard to accountability and corruption. According to several reports, corruption is one of the most important threats to Benin's democracy.⁵⁰ Among the African countries classified as 'free' by Freedom House, Benin is one of the most corrupt. According to the Transparency International 2010 Corruption Index (0 = highly corrupt and 10 = very clean), Benin has a score as low as 2.8.⁵¹ According to some intelligence agencies, the country is becoming a platform for Latin American drug dealers for their exports to Europe and Asia, with the potential complicity of local powerful actors.

For these reasons, donors participate actively in efforts to make governance cleaner in the country. For instance, they have pushed for the adoption of a new national anti-corruption law which, by June 2011, had been declared constitutional by the

⁴⁶ Interview with anonymous official, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁴⁷ Personal communication with Jean Barbé, European Union's delegation in Cotonou, Benin, July 2011.

⁴⁸ Interview with Michel Dayamba USAID Benin, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁴⁹ Interview with Isidore Agbokou, UNDP Benin, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁵⁰ See Wilfrid Hervé Adoun and François K Awoudo (2008). *Benin: une démocratie prisonnière de la corruption*, tome 1. Cotonou: Éditions COPEF; Observatoire de lutte contre la corruption (2008). *Livre Blanc sur l'état de la corruption au Bénin*. Cotonou: Impress.

⁵¹ http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2010/results

Constitutional Court and sent to the Parliament. The struggle against corruption has been marked by the establishment of an anti-corruption day (8 December).⁵² Denmark, one of the donors that strongly lobbied in favour of such an initiative, supports anti-corruption institutions like the Anti-Corruption Institute and offers training programmes to state employees who travel to Denmark for this purpose.

Donors' strategies with regard to accountability and anti-corruption are diverse and concentrate on multiple entry points. For example, the EU, with its long tradition of intervening in favour of promoting accountability in Benin, promotes NGO participation in the preparation and implementation of anti-corruption and accountability programmes and supports strengthening Benin's legal and institutional framework, including the judiciary.⁵³

One of the most interesting examples of co-operation to improve accountability is provided by the Netherlands. This donor's assistance is generally directed at verification mechanisms and institutions that strengthen accountability and public financial management. According to the Governance Officer of the Embassy, the Netherlands try to adopt a holistic view of aid by granting support to watchdog institutions that keep a check on public policies.⁵⁴ One example is the training and technical support provided to the Financial Chamber of the Supreme Court, which aims to help it acquire the capacity to better scrutinize the management of public funds. This is particularly important given that since 2009 there has not been a state account settlement law to control the execution of the State budget and confirm the regularity of all its financial operations on an annual basis.⁵⁵ The lack of this law has been one reason why aid declined during 2010 and 2011. A second example is the State General Inspection (IGE), an institution considered to be one of the potentially most efficient tools in the struggle against corruption and bribery in the public administration and whose role is to conduct regular inspections in all financial sectors.

Donors were also significantly implicated in the recently implemented reform (June 2011) regarding the inspection of ministries, an institution in charge of controlling how each ministry spends public funds. Rather than being under the authority of the respective ministries, the inspectors are now under the supervision of the IGE, which is housed within the office of the presidency. Given the level of mismanagement of public funds in the country, donors are unanimous in their opinion that such an institution is crucial. However, some point out that the IGE could well be used by the President against political rivals and opponents.

Together, Denmark, Switzerland, the UNDP and the Netherlands also implemented a project that provides funds to Benin's Ombudsman in order to help it defend citizen's rights. Since the institution is ill-equipped to provide services that have complex social, juridical and financial ramifications due to its lack of human resources, donors have

⁵² République du Bénin, *Rapport d'avancement 2010 de la Stratégie de Croissance pour la Réduction de la Pauvreté*. Cotonou, Juin 2011: 70.

⁵³ République du Bénin-Union européenne, «Document de stratégie pays et programme indicatif national pour la période 2008-2013», http://ec.europa.eu/development/icenter/repository/scanned_bj_csp10_fr.pdf

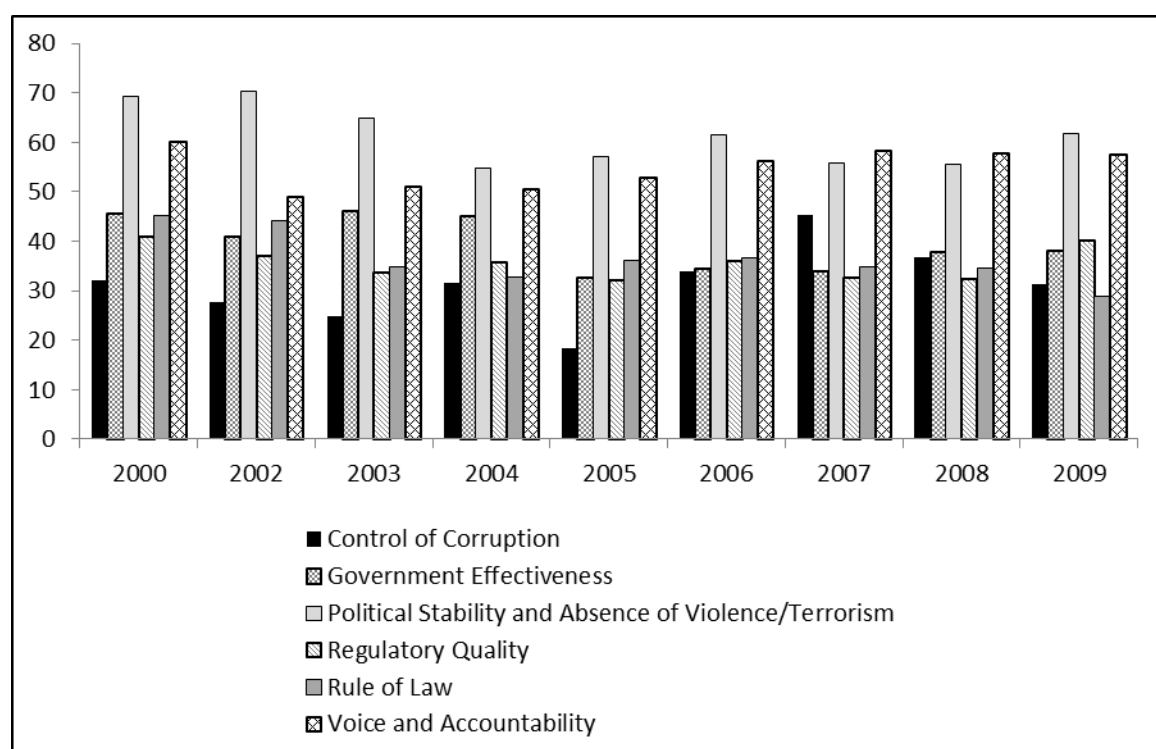
⁵⁴ Interview with Francis Laleyé, interviewed in Cotonou, June 2011.

⁵⁵ Interview with Bertin Aizonou, deputy director of the economic and financial cell, Ministry of Finance, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

principally financed the recruitment of external specialists, while simultaneously strengthening the capacity of the Ombudsman’s own internal human resources.⁵⁶

However, as we can see in Figure 3, the results of all these initiatives are ambiguous. From 2004 onwards, many governance indicators related to the quality of democracy deteriorated despite donor interventions, particularly in the fields of corruption control and rule of law. The election of President Yayi Boni in 2006 did not really change the trend despite his rhetorical commitment at that time to a crusade against corruption and bad governance. The African Peer Review Mechanism Report on Benin has also highlighted many of these challenges. Even though this report recognizes the efforts undertaken by the government, it also stressed their weaknesses, especially with regard to instruments and procedures of public financial control.⁵⁷

Figure 3: Benin Progress Report, World Government Indicators



Notes: A higher percentage on the 0 to 100 scale indicates better performance.

Source: Constructed from World Government Indicators. Available at: <http://info.worldbank.org/governance/wgi/index.asp>.

Some observers believe that the last three years of President Kérékou’s second term initiated such a pervasive culture of mismanagement and creation of vested interests among major stakeholders that the situation is difficult to change. In fact, analysts explain many crises between Parliament and the President over major reforms through this lens.⁵⁸ The lack of decisive improvements in accountability and governance in general has been highlighted by almost all the persons I interviewed. Denmark will even

⁵⁶ Interview with Francis Laleyé, Embassy of the Netherlands, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁵⁷ Mécanisme Africain d’Évaluation par les Pairs, *Rapport d’évaluation de la République du Bénin*, Janvier 2008: 179-80.

⁵⁸ However, this retreat is due officially to a new co-operation policy in Denmark which consists to focus on a small number of recipient countries (interview with Sylvain Degbé).

close its embassy in Cotonou in 2012. The official explanation is that Denmark has decided to concentrate its aid on a small number of countries. Yet, it seems clear that the Danish decision is also due to perceptions that despite all their efforts, Benin's performance remains insufficient.⁵⁹

5 Conclusion: Improving the quality of democracy in Benin

Benin began its democratic experiment in 1990. Since then, foreign aid has helped foster a relatively sound economic recovery, which in turn has helped democracy in the country. According to many observers, Benin's democracy has even become consolidated based on minimalist criteria related to regularity of elections and the turnover of incumbents (see Beetham 1994: 160-1). Since the first transfer of power in 1991, Benin has experienced two other alternations of government in 1996 and 2007. Finally, the country's democracy has survived over time, which is a good sign given that for many authors '20 years, say of regular competitive elections are sufficient to judge a democracy consolidated' (Beetham 2004: 160; see also Lindberg 2009).

Even more importantly, the Beninese are remarkably confident in the durability of democracy in their country. The public opinion survey conducted by Afrobarometer in 2008 suggest that democracy has become 'the only game in town' in Benin: 91 per cent of the Beninese consider that they are completely free to vote for the candidate they prefer; most people know what democracy is; 83 per cent prefer it to other types of regimes; and 74 per cent disagree or strongly disagree with the idea that a military regime should rule their country.⁶⁰

While these facts certainly suggest that democracy in Benin is well and sound, this study has provided a more cautious assessment. A hard road is ahead when it comes to the quality of democracy, which refers to more substantial issues such as good governance, the rule of law, accountability, and transparency. Moreover, foreign aid has proven unable to help deepen Beninese democracy beyond its procedural aspects. I have demonstrated that huge problems remain regarding the functioning of political parties that are weak and hardly oriented toward programmatic politics despite foreign interventions. Also, media and journalists are characterized by a lack of professionalism and are subject to harassment under President Yayi Boni. Last but not the least, Benin is faced with enormous corruption and accountability problems that foreign aid fails to solve and which in turn, have increased donor fatigue.

In such a situation, innovative policies are needed if Benin is to remain a democratic flagship country in Africa and become more than an electoral democracy. Three types of initiatives seem particularly critical. First, Benin is one of the few African countries to have an electronic electoral list, and this initiative has the potential to guarantee more transparency. However, as the disputed 2011 presidential elections demonstrate, the country needs a national consensus on the procedures of its maintenance and renewal, as well as a stable electoral law. This requires transforming the CENA into a non-political body to prevent the incumbent from being tempted to modify the rules at every electoral cycle and to discourage political parties from constantly quarreling over the electoral process.

⁵⁹ Interview with Sylvain Degbé, Embassy of Denmark, Cotonou, Benin, June 2011.

⁶⁰ See: <http://www.afrobarometer.org/>

Second, more resources need to be devoted to the institutions that monitor governance issues, as some donors like the Netherlands have already recognized. Comparative studies on the state (Bach and Gazibo 2011) demonstrate that the differences among countries regarding patrimonial and corrupt practices are not differences in nature, but differences regarding the degree of institutionalization of the state.

Finally, given the complexity of deepening democracy, cross-cutting initiatives rather than sector-based initiatives should be prioritized. For example, rather than providing training to journalists, MPs, unions and other civil society organizations separately, regrouping them into common themes could potentially be more fruitful, given that these groups rarely know what donors do in sectors other than their own.

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