



Non-state actors in Benin Dialogue on cooperation is getting organised

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This new series of briefs is designed to facilitate an exchange of information on the role played by non-state actors (NSAs) in implementing the Cotonou Partnership Agreement between the ACP and the EU. Their aim is to cite examples of innovative practices and to demonstrate the challenges facing NSAs as development partners in different countries.

Background

The political perspective

Since gaining independence in 1960, Benin has experienced three major political periods, each of which has been very different from the others. The most tumultuous period, from 1960 to 1972, was marked by a succession of military coups that seriously destabilised the country's social and political life. In October 1972, a military coup brought Mathieu Kérékou to power at the head of a revolutionary military government (RMG) that was to rule Benin for the next seventeen years. The RMG pursued a Marxist-Leninist policy and in 1975 adopted a new Constitution establishing a one-party system based on the Benin People's Revolutionary Party. An economic crisis and the international recession of the 1980s led to fierce public protest against the party's totalitarian dictatorial policies.

In 1990, President Kérékou convened a 'Conference of Living Forces of the Nation' to counter the protests, thereby ushering in an era of democratisation. Since then, Benin has had a pluralist democratic system, with a new Constitution to govern the workings of the state. In this presidential-type regime, new institutions such as the National Assembly, the Constitutional Court, the Supreme Court, the High Court of Justice, the Economic and Social Council and the High Authority for Audiovisual Resources and Communications act as counterweights to the executive.

The creation of a single reference file for government staff, an anti-corruption plan and regular elections have all helped to reinforce democracy. The alternation of power is now an established practice: Benin held its third presidential election in March 2001 and its fourth general election in March 2003, with two peaceful changes of government (with Kérékou handing over to

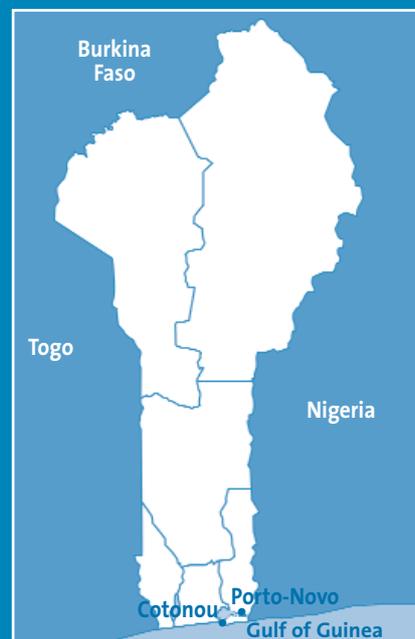
Soglo, who subsequently made way once again for Kérékou).

Despite all this, good governance - without which the goals of faster economic growth and poverty reduction cannot be attained, however well-intentioned a government's policies and reforms may be - remains a major concern.

Fact File

- Human Development Indicator Rank: 162/173
- Human Poverty Index Rank: 2003: 95/103
- Total Population (millions), 2003: 7.9
- Urban population (as % of total), 2003: 44.6
- GDP per capita (US\$), 2003: 517
- Life expectancy at birth (years), 2003: 54.0
- Infant mortality rate (per 1000 live births), 2003: 91
- ODA received per capita (US\$), 2003: 43.7
- Total debt service (as % of GDP), 2003: 1.7

Source: *Human Development Indicators 2005*, UNDP website



Source map: ECDPM

The economic and social perspective

Over the past 30 years, Benin has seen three main types of economic policy: an increase in the number of public-sector staff from 1974 onwards, the cutbacks introduced in 1982 and the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) launched in 1989 with the support of development partners such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

These measures have enabled Benin's economy to start growing once more and, by the end of the third SAP, a degree of economic stability began to emerge. Yet despite the numerous reforms and the huge amount of money that has been pumped into the economy, living standards have not significantly improved. High average growth rates and a relatively low rate of inflation have not prevented the country from remaining heavily in debt.¹

As part of the effort to reduce poverty, the Beninese authorities have drawn up strategic management plans - including the recent poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP) - which are set out in various reference documents and programmes, such as the report on national long-term perspective studies (NLTPSs) and the second government action programme known as PAG II. One goal that these strategic frameworks have in common is to make the country more prosperous and hence reduce poverty. The NLTPSs see Benin in 2025 as 'a model country, well governed, united and peaceful, with a prosperous, competitive economy, a flourishing cultural life and a high level of welfare.' One of the central aims of the PAG II programme is to consolidate good governance and step up the fight against poverty. The PRSP, reflecting the government's outlook, likewise focuses on strengthening the macro-economic framework, good governance and the ability of the poor to participate in decision-making and production processes.

All this is being put into practice with the aid of programmes supported by the country's development partners.² The government has decided to exploit the country's assets and potential in order to implement a poverty reduction programme based on:

- respect for the rules of democracy and human rights;³
- socio-political and macroeconomic stability;
- the advantages of Benin's location.

Various poverty reduction initiatives have already been taken to enhance the ability of the poor to generate income, to improve the availability of health services and education,

to provide people with drinking water, to guarantee safe food for all, to manage the environment sustainably, and to strengthen capacity to manage and use public resources.

However, although the various economic policies and measures of the past few years have boosted economic growth (according to the NLTPSs), these reforms and subsequent development strategies have so far had little impact. Many problems remain:

- an economic environment that is not conducive to production or private sector initiative;
- a lack of social standards;
- politically inexperienced actors;
- extensive illiteracy;
- trafficking in children;
- inadequate standards of governance;
- an almost complete lack of technology.

The reform policies and development programmes that have been implemented so far have not significantly reduced poverty, which affects rural more than urban areas, women more than men, and is particularly harsh on vulnerable groups.

Decentralisation and democratisation

The decentralisation process for which the 1990 Constitution paved the way was approved by the National Assembly in 2000. However, the policy did not truly start to take shape until the communal and municipal elections in December 2002 and January 2003 and the creation of the communal councils. The aim of the policy is to make people responsible for running their own communities, thereby strengthening grass-roots democracy and promoting sustainable development. However, its implementation has been hampered by various political, institutional, legislative and regulatory difficulties, as well as a general lack of human and technical resources. As in many other countries, the transfer of funding⁴ is the main obstacle, and there have also been problems with the transfer of powers (as regards the roles and procedures of the various government departments). Another challenge here is the involvement of civil society as a partner for the communal councils.

The anti-corruption plan has not yet had as much impact as it might have, and little has been done in response to various financial scandals. As long as corruption continues to hamper the growth of democracy, it will be difficult for Benin to 'take off' economically, socially and culturally. The judicial system is no exception and, until the big embezzlement cases in 2002,⁵ moral integrity was a quality restricted to a mere handful of

honest folk. Thus, although progress has definitely been made towards the establishment of democratic principles, the country is not fulfilling yet all the criteria for good governance.

Civil-society and community organisations in Benin

The past 30 years have seen a proliferation of community activities in the form of youth movements, charity organisations and education groups. The national conference held in 1990 and the democratisation of society have fostered the gradual emergence of civil-society organisations (CSOs). This new phase is creating opportunities for new forms of involvement in the process of planning and implementing development initiatives.

The term 'civil society' first appeared in an ordinance defining cooperatives and cooperative unions as long ago as the 1960s,⁶ but did not become part of everyday vocabulary in Benin until the 1990s. Its origins were thus essentially rural (i.e. it was used to refer to agricultural cooperatives). However, Article 25 of the Constitution adopted by referendum on 11 December 1990, replacing the Basic Law that had governed the one-party state during the revolutionary period, guarantees the freedom of association. The people of Benin experienced this as a breath of fresh air, and non-governmental associations and organisations were set up throughout the country. There are now thousands of them, chiefly dealing with matters such as the environment, health and nutrition, women's rights, training, good governance, human rights, and credit and savings.

An assessment has revealed that most of them are based in urban areas and that few of them are capable of carrying out activities on the ground. They are generally lacking in professionalism, and a good many of them are 'make-work' schemes that serve to disguise unemployment⁷ (so called « food organisations », etc.).

Attempts to group associations, particularly non-governmental organisations (NGOs), into federations supported by development partners have been unsuccessful. This is because the organisations concerned only last as long as the time their promoters need to achieve their goals. They are not necessarily set up in response to a need to form an association, but in some cases simply in order to obtain funding through development programmes (known as the 'hand-out rationale'). One commonly expressed fear is that these umbrella organisations are set up by people who are well-

informed of the available opportunities and use their members to further their own interests. Once established, such structures become tools for negotiating international aid on behalf of the members of the umbrella organisations, certain NGOs or associations represented within the secretariat.

Nevertheless, despite operational difficulties, sectoral networks are now emerging in certain areas, enabling their members to mobilise resources and capacity for targeted action in specific fields or aimed at specific groups. Some of these networks have been praised for their initiative and efficiency either in the national debate or through their work at community level. The strength of these umbrella organisations lies in their ability to mobilise their members, the fact that senior posts are filled by rotation, their services to grass-roots members, their strategic plans and highly valued activities, and the development of membership fees.⁸

Since most multilateral or international cooperation programmes now insist on consultation with a representative majority of civil society - examples being the PRSPs and the national indicative programmes (NIPs) - a strategy for involving such non-state actors is essential.

Benin and cooperation with the European Union

The role of non-state actors in cooperation before the Cotonou Partnership Agreement

Cooperation between Benin and the European Union (EU) began in the 1960s with the creation of the first European Development Fund (EDF). Successive EDFs, extending over five-year periods, included both programmable and non-programmable aid. The first eight EDFs provided Benin with a total of EUR 621,950,000 worth of funding⁹ (not including regional cooperation). Over the past 15 years, cooperation with Benin has focused on the communication infrastructure, health, rural development and support for structural adjustment. Benin also obtains EDF funding as part of regional cooperation.

Non-state actors in Benin were not consulted when this aid was programmed: until the Cotonou Partnership Agreement was signed, no specific arrangements were made for them to participate in a strategic dialogue with the National Authorising Officer (NAO) and the European Commission (EC). On the other hand, some

less consistently funded support programmes (targeted at 'non-focal' sectors) were aimed more directly at non-state actors, which were more or less directly involved in carrying them out (e.g. support for and development of partnerships with the private sector, cultural projects such as digital cinema, etc.)

At the same time, projects funded from the European Commission budget (co-financing) enabled certain national NGOs to work in partnership with their counterparts in the North, in areas including education, health, the institutional development of local associations and microfinance, as well as human rights.

The role played by non-state actors in the cooperation between Benin and the European Union thus remained marginal until the Cotonou Partnership Agreement was implemented. It remained limited to project implementation and never extended to participation in a tripartite dialogue with government and donors.

Programming of the 9th EDF

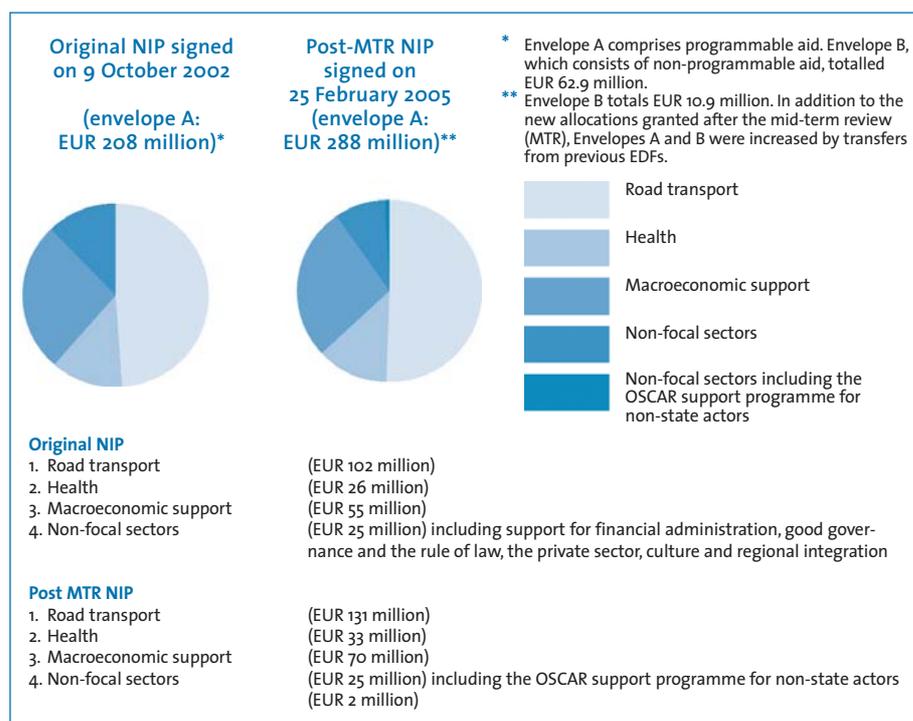
The aid programming process has been fundamentally reformed since the Cotonou Partnership Agreement was signed and is now more performance-oriented than it used to be. It is based on a five-year cooperation strategy identifying a limited number

of sectors so as to ensure that activities have optimum impact. The NIP specifies which activities should be funded and includes a timetable. A regular, flexible review mechanism (providing for annual and mid-term reviews) enables the cooperation strategy - which in the case of Benin was adopted on 9 October 2002 - to be constantly updated. The project is carried out with the help of an EDF financial envelope worth EUR 275 million (i.e. EUR 208 million for programmable aid and EUR 67 million for unforeseen contingencies).

As usual, the cooperation strategy paper was drawn up by the leading actors in the programming exercise, namely the NAO and the EC, even though the Cotonou Partnership Agreement has established the basic principle that non-state actors should be involved in cooperation, notably by being consulted during the programming phase. As one study has shown,¹⁰ no organised body representing civil society or non-state actors in general joined the government in formulating either the cooperation strategy paper or the NIP. The process of drafting the PRSP was cited as an example of the involvement and consultation of civil society and non-state actors. The lack of resources (i.e. time and staff) available to the NAO and the EU was also mentioned as an explanation for this lack of consultation.¹¹

This missed opportunity for non-state actors to participate actively in the drafting of the

Figure 1 NIP for 9th EU-Benin EDF



cooperation strategy paper partly explains the absence in the NIP of any specific allocation to encourage participation by non-state actors and build their capacity. During the first programming exercise, these actors were not invited to express their own concerns or needs, and indeed were not in a position to do so. Nor were CSOs consulted when the 2002 annual review was drawn up; however, they were involved in the joint annual review in 2003¹². From July 2003 onwards, non-state actors also took part in negotiations on economic partnership agreements. Arrangements for consultation are thus gradually taking shape.

The mid-term review

The participatory approach enshrined by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement had not therefore been fully translated into concrete action by the time of the 2004 mid-term review. Nevertheless, the mid-term review of the Agreement presented an outstanding opportunity to make changes.

Illustrating the innovative system of rolling programming, which allows cooperation strategies to be regularly adjusted in the light of performance, the 2004 mid-term review for Benin led to an increase of EUR 70 million in programmable aid, while maintaining the country strategy set out in the cooperation strategy and the NIP. This time, non-state actors were consulted in the following manner:

- the European Commission delegation and the NAO invited representatives of civil society to an initial information meeting and invited them to inspect the review documents;
- the delegates were given several weeks to prepare comments and summarise their views on cooperation between Benin and the EU;
- another meeting with the official partners (i.e. the NAO and the EC delegation) gave them an opportunity to express their ideas.

Despite being a first step towards formal consultation, this exercise nonetheless did not satisfy those involved. Whilst the official partners stressed the relevance of the consultations, they also pointed to the difficulty of taking account of the comments made. Conflicting claims and technical failures sometimes made it difficult to structure the input from non-state actors. The non-state actors, for their part, welcomed the effort by the official partners to finally involve them in a strategic dialogue on cooperation choices, but felt that the consultation arrangements failed to take account of their own constraints (i.e. a lack

of time to examine data and documents, a limited capacity to submit a joint response and doubts as to the impact of their views).

At the same time, the mid-term review created a useful dynamic, coinciding as it did with a study supported by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) together with the Platform for Civil-Society Actors in Benin (PASCIB) on the topic of Benin civil society's role in drafting and implementing the NIP, and proposals for the mid-term review. The views and proposals set out in the report were fine-tuned at a number of meetings with the EC delegation, and the document was then distributed. It provided evidence in favour of participation by non-state actors in redefining strategies and priority sectors and, through feedback, helped launch a public debate on EU cooperation and national development priorities. However, some of the conclusions and recommendations (such as a request for emergency aid for PASCIB) seemed more like advocacy in favour of specific actors rather than proposals to improve the role played by civil society in Benin in monitoring the review process.

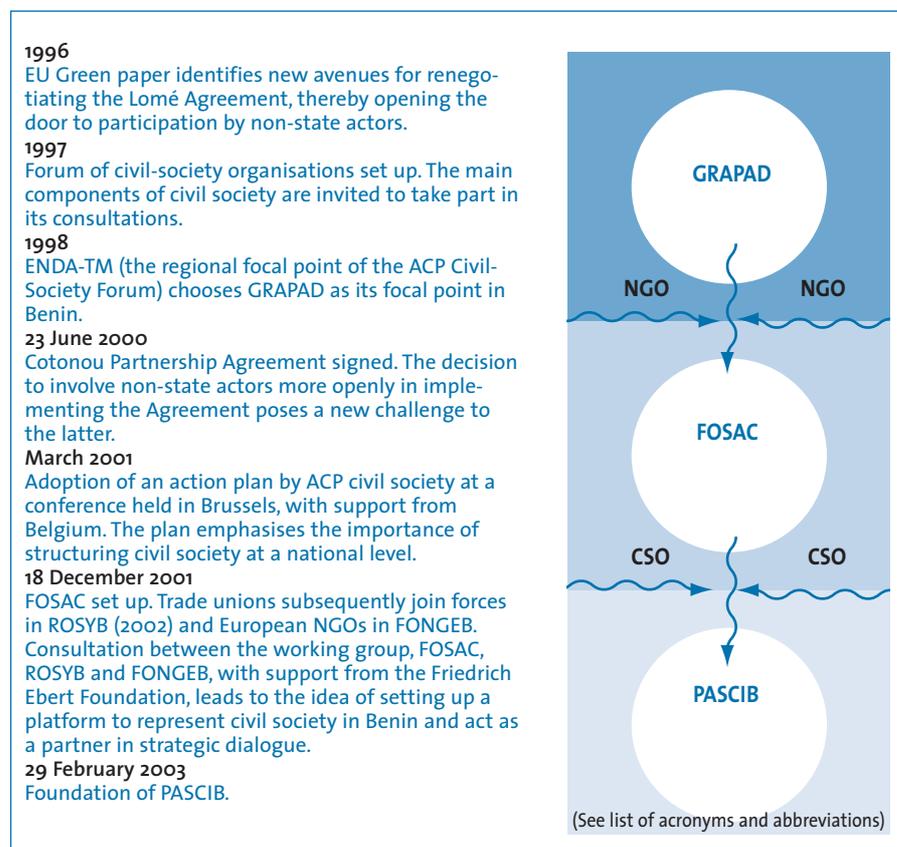
Despite the document's limited impact, the difficulty of incorporating the results of consultations into final decisions and the

need to make innovative special arrangements, the participation of non-state actors in the mid-term review was a decisive step towards establishing a tripartite dialogue on cooperation between Benin and the EU. It enabled the various parties to get to know one another, with all their limitations and potential, and to move towards a meaningful debate between non-state actors and the EC delegation. Moreover, the inclusion of non-state representatives in the ministerial committee responsible for monitoring the current trade negotiations demonstrates the relevance of public-private partnerships between government and non-state actors on major issues. It also points the way towards greater participation by non-state actors in programming the 10th EDF.

A new support programme for non-state actors

During the 2002 annual review, it was decided that EUR 2 million would be released to fund a support programme for civil-society actors. The purpose of the three-year programme is to take fuller account of non-state actors in decisions on development policies and programmes in all

Figure 2 From autonomous NGO to national platform: how civil society is organising itself



areas of the country's economic and social life. This entails building the capacity of CSOs. The programme aims to set up a National Resource Centre that will be linked as closely as possible to CSOs through the agency of local support units. A National Capacity-Building Fund will also be established, and the ministry responsible for relations with institutions, civil society and expatriate Beninese citizens (MCRI-SCBE) will receive support in setting up an inventory system for CSOs and reviewing the legislation governing¹³ them. A tender notice¹⁴ was published in June 2005, the aim being to recruit technical assistance for the programme, which is known as the Programme for Supported and Strengthened Civil-Society Organisations (OSCAR).

Organising non-state actors in Benin

Description of the process

The development of ACP-EU cooperation has helped to encourage the structuring of non-state actors in Benin. At the end of the 1990s, when civil society in Benin was flourishing in the new and favourable political climate, the ACP and the EU began a major debate on the future of cooperation. A Green Paper published in 1996 (indicating new avenues for renegotiation of the Lomé Agreement) established the principle of civil-society participation in cooperation. With support from their European counterparts, CSOs in ACP countries joined forces to take part in the debate, and held a meeting in Entebbe, Uganda, in 1997. This led to the establishment of the ACP Civil-Society Forum. Steered by regional branches (focal points) and backed by national partners, the Forum sought to raise awareness of the issues affecting ACP-EU cooperation and the importance of an organised form of participation. ENDA-TM (Environment and Development in the Third World), an international NGO based in Senegal that was the focal point for the West African region, asked a Beninese NGO called GRAPAD (Research and Action Group for the Promotion of Agriculture and Development)¹⁵ to attend the Forum's meetings.

This marked the beginning of the process of organising non-state actors in Benin to enable them to participate in the implementation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. Starting out from one national NGO, the process gradually brought together various organisations. Although the inevitably limited group could not claim to be representative of the full range of non-

state actors in Benin, this valuable initiative was a serious attempt by the organisations to establish themselves as discussion partners in a strategic dialogue on ACP-EU cooperation.

Taking advantage of GRAPAD's experience with ACP-EU cooperation and the increased scope for participation, NGOs in Benin joined forces in the Forum of Non-Government Organisations (FOSAC) monitoring the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, whilst other groups of actors, such as trade unions, set up federations of their own. These informal networks acknowledged the importance of informing their members of the opportunities afforded by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement and of organising themselves to participate in the dialogue on ACP-EU cooperation. A national platform known as PASCIB, a coalition of umbrella organisations committed to implementing the Cotonou Partnership Agreement in Benin, was set up for this purpose.

PASCIB: mandate and roles

PASCIB's rather broad mandate is to work towards qualitative and quantitative changes that can help reduce poverty in all its forms and create the conditions for sustained development through participation by civil society in decision-making and policy-making processes, projects and programmes, as well as their monitoring and evaluation.

The platform seeks to encourage the genuine involvement of non-state actors in the implementation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. Since September 2005, PASCIB delegations have travelled all over the country to inform members of its constituent organisations about the issues raised by the Agreement and to consolidate PASCIB at a grass-roots level by setting up local branches. PASCIB intends to focus its efforts initially on the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, and subsequently to extend its work to other agreements or partnerships, for which it intends to form specialist committees.

Although PASCIB is thus primarily concerned with ACP-EU cooperation, it does not wish to confine itself solely to this area. Instead, it plans to establish itself as a national partner in discussions with the government (on strategic policy planning) and the donor community (on cooperation frameworks and programmes). Although the structuring and representation process was triggered by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, PASCIB intends to monitor issues that extend beyond it.

As part of its efforts to build capacity for dialogue through information and consulta-

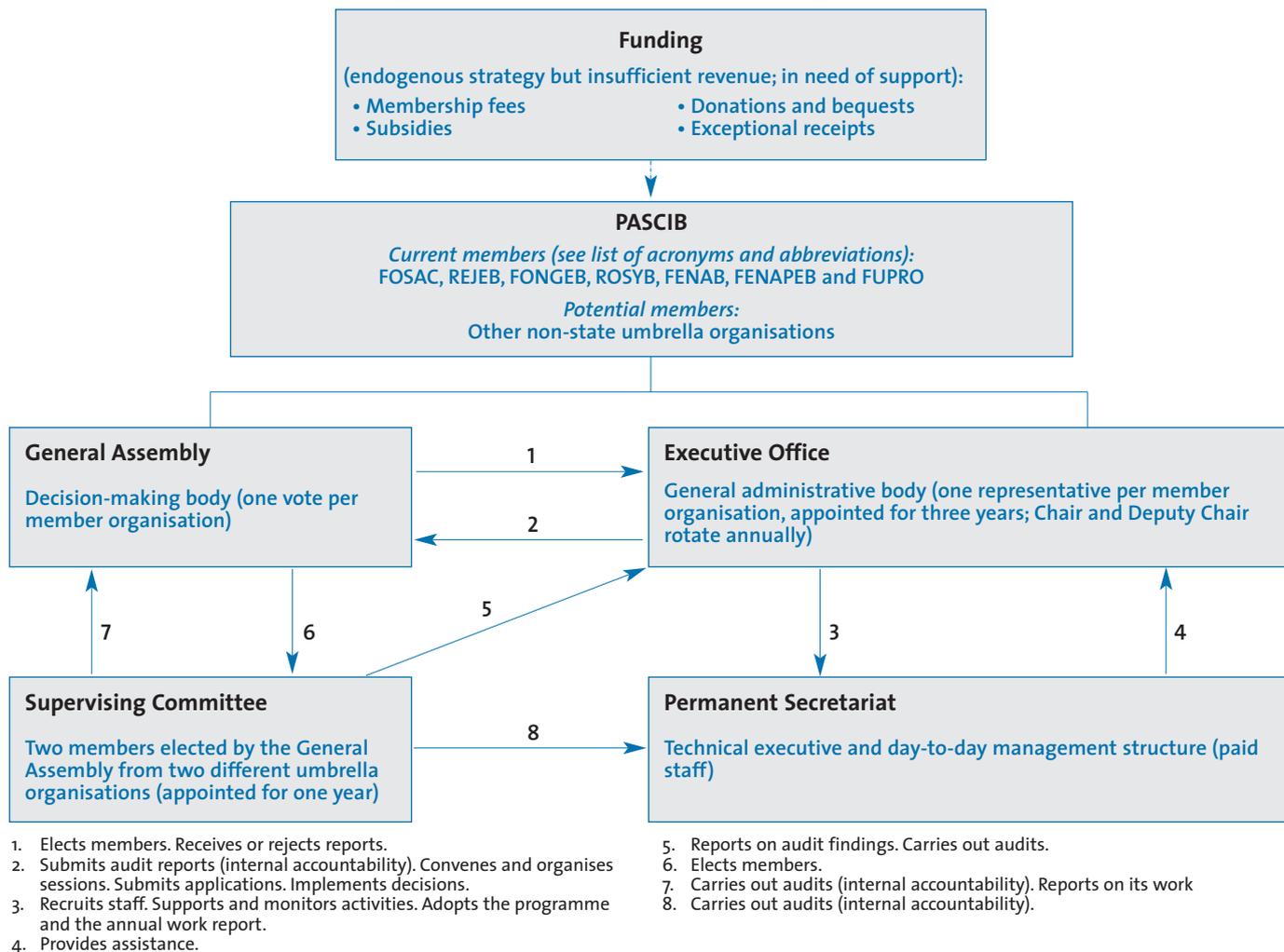
tion, the platform proposes to take action in the fields of information, communication and advocacy, as well as to mobilise resources and undertake projects for the benefit of grass-roots communities. Although a number of workshops have been held to fine-tune its action plan, the mobilisation of resources remains a major obstacle to activities that would enable PASCIB to achieve its stated objectives. Although this process has received a certain amount of support (particularly through a partnership with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation), PASCIB has so far received no funding either from the EDF or from any non-EU donor. Although it was set up as a result of ACP-EU cooperation, PASCIB regards its lack of direct funding as a guarantee of its autonomy and a safeguard against the risk of instrumentalisation. At the same time, this is a serious obstacle to its capacity to take action and hence extend services to its members - a key factor in maintaining its legitimacy.

PASCIB: membership and representativeness

PASCIB is a coalition of umbrella organisations already various networks and federations. It wishes to become more representative and is hence open to any organisation wishing to work in the same spirit of analysis and action for the effective implementation of national partnership agreements, particularly the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. Any organisation that is an officially recognised, active association of non-state actors can join PASCIB simply by applying to the executive office.

PASCIB thus defines itself as a platform made up of a wide range of civil-society actors grouped together in large organisations (see table below) that are each highly representative of their own particular fields. However, despite its fairly clear institutional framework, the fact that its founding members are known for their civic roots and their development work, and its wish to attract new members, the platform is not all-embracing. Various Beninese actors working in socio-economic fields that have an impact on poverty reduction have not joined PASCIB, despite being valuable discussion partners for central government, local authorities and development partners. The platform has not yet managed to recruit any members from various categories such as human rights organisations. Furthermore, grass-roots organisations can be members of an umbrella organisation that is part of PASCIB without actually being aware of the platform's existence.

Figure 3 PASCIB is a coalition of umbrella organisations



Mechanisms for dialogue

Dialogue on cooperation between Benin and the EU

The various EDF programming exercises in Benin prior to the 9th EDF were all treated as strictly government business. As far as ordinary citizens were concerned, the only visible sign of Benin-EU cooperation was the name of the European Union, which was mentioned repeatedly during the inauguration of new infrastructural projects or the completion of EDF-funded projects. Now that the Cotonou Partnership Agreement has established civil-society participation as an essential principle of cooperation, the nature of this cooperation has become clearer and people are more aware of the importance of involving non-state actors in the country's strategic management. However, the process of establishing mechanisms for dialogue under the terms of the agreement is taking some time.

One striking initiative has brought together non-state and state actors in a genuine dialogue: the ACP-EU working group set up by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. This is simply a framework for analysing and discussing the strategies needed to ensure genuine participation by non-state actors. This informal arena for dialogue includes CSOs such as GRAPAD and the Benin Association of Independent Trade Unions, as well as various departments of the Ministry of Finance and the Economy, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and African Integration, and the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Promotion of Employment. The first few meetings provided an opportunity for an initial exchange of views and closer contact between civil society and the government on the implementation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. With the emergence of PASCIB, further structuring and the establishment of a support programme for non-state actors through the 9th EDF, the meetings have become less frequent, and their 'linking' role has made way for a more formal public-private dialogue.

At a training seminar held in 2002 for members of parliament on the Cotonou Partnership Agreement,¹⁶ a case study on the role of non-state actors led to a useful debate between parliamentarians and representatives of civil society. For the first time, members of parliament heard the latter describe the structuring process that was taking place within civil society and emphasise the need for greater interaction between parliament and civil society. Although no formal arrangements were made at the time, the meeting increased both sides' awareness of the need for further dialogue.

In conclusion, a proper mechanism for dialogue between state and non-state actors, with flexible but established arrangements, has not yet emerged in Benin. At the same time, certain initiatives do suggest there is now trend in this direction.

Dialogue on national development

In 1990, civil-society representatives were invited to attend a 'Conference of Living Forces of the Nation'. This gave them an opportunity to participate in a historic transition to democracy and to help establish Benin's new political identity. Since then, citizens have been encouraged (by the upholding of the right to freedom of association and expression) to set up numerous associations which, though poorly organised, have succeeded in expressing their views on various government issues and raising public awareness of them. Civil society has contributed to the debate on various poverty reduction programmes, has educated people about how to exercise

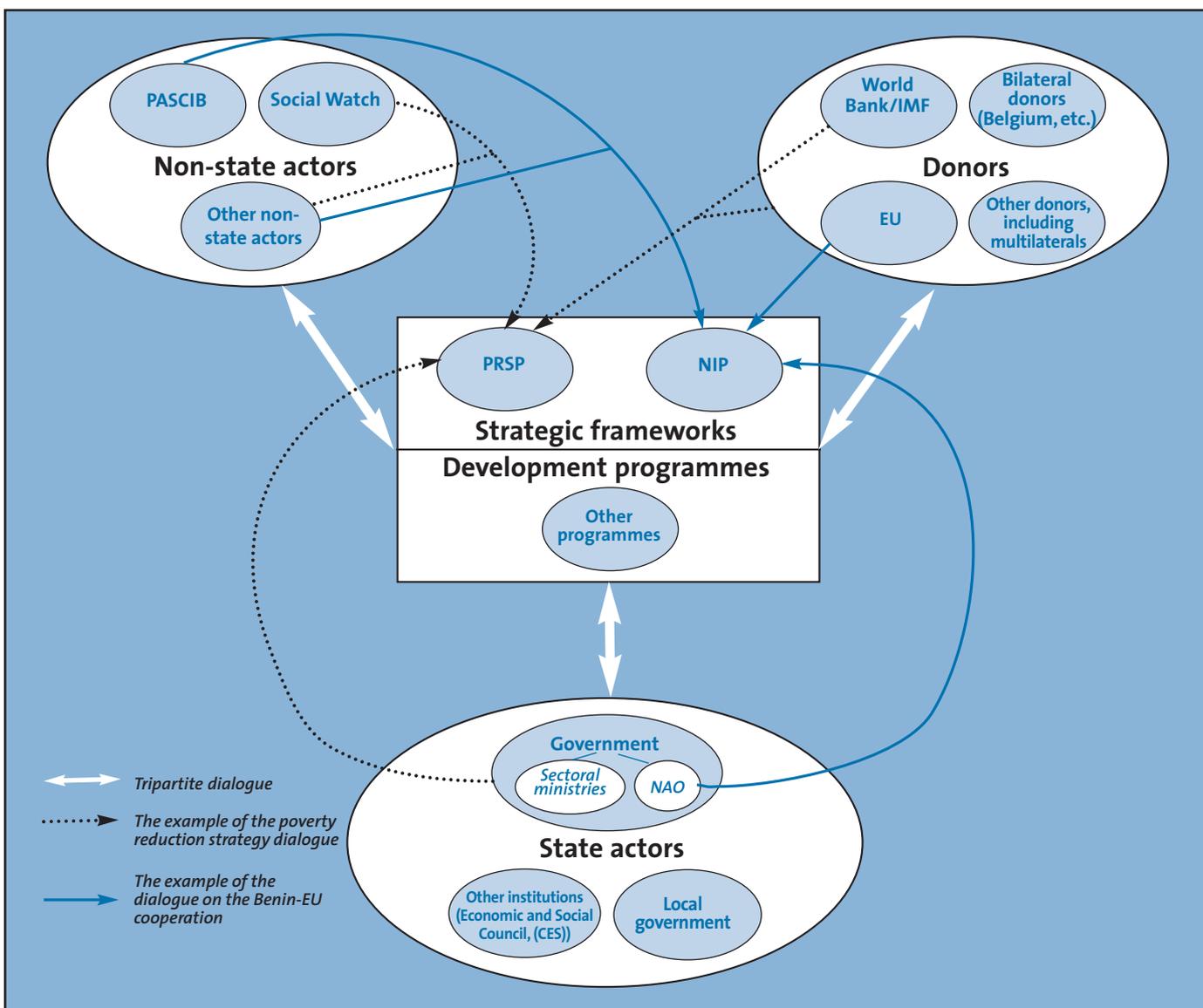
their voting rights in a responsible manner, has promoted the National Economic Conference, etc. It has also helped to organise all these activities.

For its part, the state is becoming aware of the role of civil society as a whole and has taken steps to create institutional frameworks for consultation. It has also been persuaded to do so by the actions of donors, who, while supporting the transfer of certain functions away from central government (i.e. decentralisation), have highlighted the importance of a strategic dialogue on national development priorities and have encouraged the emergence of civil society by making its involvement an established feature of cooperation. The Economic and Social Council¹⁷

represents the various components of society, including the government, the National Assembly and non-state actors. It gives its views on draft socio-economic legislation and is entitled to propose either to the government or the National Assembly such economic or social reforms as it considers to be in the public interest.

A ministry responsible for relations with institutions, civil society and expatriate Beninese citizens was set up in 1999.¹⁸ It includes a specialist agency known as the Centre for the Promotion of Civil Society, formerly known as CPA-ONG, whose task is to create a permanent framework for consultation between development associations, NGOs and the state.

Figure 4 Dialogue mechanism: a dynamic with multiple potential



However, many actors feel that these institutions are not politically neutral and that they do not necessarily provide a favourable setting for action by an organised, free civil society. For example, a report on the Civil-Society Forum for the Promotion of National Studies on Benin's Long-Term Prospects up to 2025 states that participants are highly apprehensive about the origins of those members of the Economic and Social Council who are appointed by the executive and the legislature. Many organisations are reluctant to take part in initiatives launched by these bodies. At the same time, the institutions complain - sometimes with justification - that certain Beninese NGOs actually serve the interests of political parties, especially at a local level.

Another example of a participatory strategic dialogue is the way in which the PRSP was drafted. This gave the government an opportunity to create an institutional framework, known as the National Committee for Development and Poverty Reduction, made up of representatives of the government, specialist agencies and civil society, including NGOs.

The PRSP itself suggests that civil-society organisations, with backing from the government and development partners, joined forces in order to provide input when it was being drawn up. However, not only are there doubts surrounding the quality of this input, there have also been signs that not all interests were represented. For example, during talks held at the Ministry of Finance and the Economy on the initiative of the EC delegation, it was discovered that some of those present had attended consultations with civil society on the PRSP the previous day, unbeknown to either the members of PASCIB or the EC delegation representative responsible for relations with civil society (31 March 2004).

Besides the PRSP, there are other mechanisms for consultation, such as reports monitoring progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the official ceremonies at which civil society presents New Year's greetings to the head of state. Aside from their purely formal aspect, the latter give CSOs an opportunity to voice their concerns in a public arena and to comment on the government's subsequent response.

To sum up, despite a degree of mutual distrust between public and private partners, national mechanisms do exist for dialogue on national development. Groups of associations and NGOs, employers' organisations, trade unions and other represen-

tatives of civil society are sometimes involved in drawing up sectoral and cross-cutting development programmes and policies. In some cases, they have seats on the boards of professional training bodies or development agencies. However, despite a new awareness of the value of dialogue between state actors and representatives of civil society, these mechanisms still need considerable strengthening.

Dialogue with other partners

The PRSP also provides an excellent framework for dialogue between non-state actors in Benin and donors. Having been used, in particular, as a basis for fleshing out the cooperation strategy enshrined in the Cotonou Partnership Agreement, it ensures that all the partners are involved in setting priorities and identifying development strategies for Benin. Although this process could lead to genuine consultation between the various actors in society, its quality still needs to be improved, as there remain doubts as to the transparency of the selection of participants, their ability to prepare input, the impact of their input and so on.

An overall mechanism for regular consultation between donors (based on a policy note on Participatory Development and Good Governance) allows the partners to coordinate their input. This includes providing joint support for decentralisation, the judiciary, civil service reform and the fight against corruption.¹⁹

At the same time, civil society is sometimes involved in drafting and implementing bilateral or multilateral development cooperation programmes, one example being the establishment of the Benin Sustainable Development Centre in collaboration with the Netherlands. This provides a setting for committees of community organisations, the government and the partner country (i.e. the Netherlands) to work together on national development issues. Although there have been other instances of such synergy in bilateral cooperation, these cannot yet be seen as constituting a regular practice.

Lessons learnt and key points

Persistent mutual distrust is an obstacle to good governance. For the past 15 years, Benin has enjoyed a peaceful democracy, the benefits of which have included freedom of expression and association. However, the prospects for good governance

have been marred by persistent corruption and human rights violations (notably trafficking in children). CSOs, which often deal with these issues (human rights organisations, for example) and voice citizens' concerns about them, can exert pressure to improve things and so directly help the country progress towards better governance. Such action is more relevant and effective if it is part of a movement backed by state actors through public-private partnership. Institutional frameworks for dialogue do in fact exist, such as the Economic and Social Council (which represents the various components of society), parliament (which represents the people) and the ministry responsible for relations with civil society. Unfortunately, far from working together, these various stakeholders tend to distrust one another. This undermines their legitimacy and effectiveness and undoubtedly limits their capacity to tackle societal issues.

Correlation between financial support for capacity-building and participation in strategic dialogue. The Cotonou Partnership Agreement provides for support programmes for non-state actors to be integrated into cooperation strategies. Yet the first NIP signed with Benin that could have taken advantage of this new provision - the 9th EDF NIP (Benin-EU), signed in 2002 - did not include such a programme. It was drawn up without any direct consultation of representatives of civil society, whose priorities had been identified during the previous PRSP exercise. These actors thus missed their first opportunity to propose the inclusion of a support programme for their benefit. Their very lack of organisation, access to information, capacity to monitor the Benin-EU cooperation agenda and persuasive power meant that they were not sufficiently proactive to insist on their right to be consulted - whereas the whole purpose of capacity-building programmes is to strengthen such skills. However, the situation was quickly remedied, as the first annual review (in 2003) allocated EUR 2 million worth of funding for this purpose. This new OSCAR programme can indeed help to tackle such problems.

Emergence of a platform. One effort to structure civil society in Benin began with a national NGO that was aware of the ACP-EU partnership, and developed into an NGO forum and finally the broader platform known as PASCIB. However, most CSOs are still weak and lacking in professionalism. There is a great temptation to respond to passing opportunities. Even though PASCIB consists of networks or thematic federations (most of which are active), this continues to

be a risk. Nor is it always easy to reconcile the interests of the various umbrella organisations, especially as the highly politicised nature of many CSOs opens the door to instrumentalisation. Members may prefer to defend their own interests through other channels (i.e. more direct links with discussion partners, ensuring that their specific needs can be directly expressed and defended; straightforward access to funding).

Endogenous strategy versus the need for funding.

Most umbrella organisations are set up with support from development partners, and some of them have received considerable support of various kinds from the very outset. PASCIB, on the other hand, has not received any EDF funding thus far, and this tends to bolster its leaders' view that the process is endogenous and hence intrinsically robust. However, if the platform is to achieve its ambitious goals, it must rapidly achieve concrete results that will persuade potential financial partners to provide support. At the same time, it needs to enhance its operational legitimacy in the eyes of its members in order to guarantee an income of its own (through membership fees and so on). Failing this, there is a risk that it will put most of its efforts into its own survival, rather than carrying out substantive activities in pursuance of its mandate.

Impact of participation in dialogue.

Do donors, official partners and the government truly welcome the expression of the views of civil society and non-state actors, or is it simply a question of their paying lip service to the idea? What steps are they taking to improve consultation arrangements and their ability to make use of information that is not always easy to integrate into the decision-making process, or may even be completely unexpected? If further progress is to be made, it is important to make clear what consultation can actually achieve, to determine how it should be organised and to provide the necessary resources (in terms of funding, staff and time). If CSOs are encouraged to express their views and take part in a strategic dialogue, this will certainly induce them to claim support for their activities and co-financing for their projects. However, their participation will also involve their adopting standpoints on strategic planning in order to trigger a public debate and hence to influence government decisions on national development priorities. A final challenge, besides mere participation in a strategic dialogue, is the role played by non-state actors in promoting good governance: how do they see this, and what is expected of them?

Challenges, issues and prospects

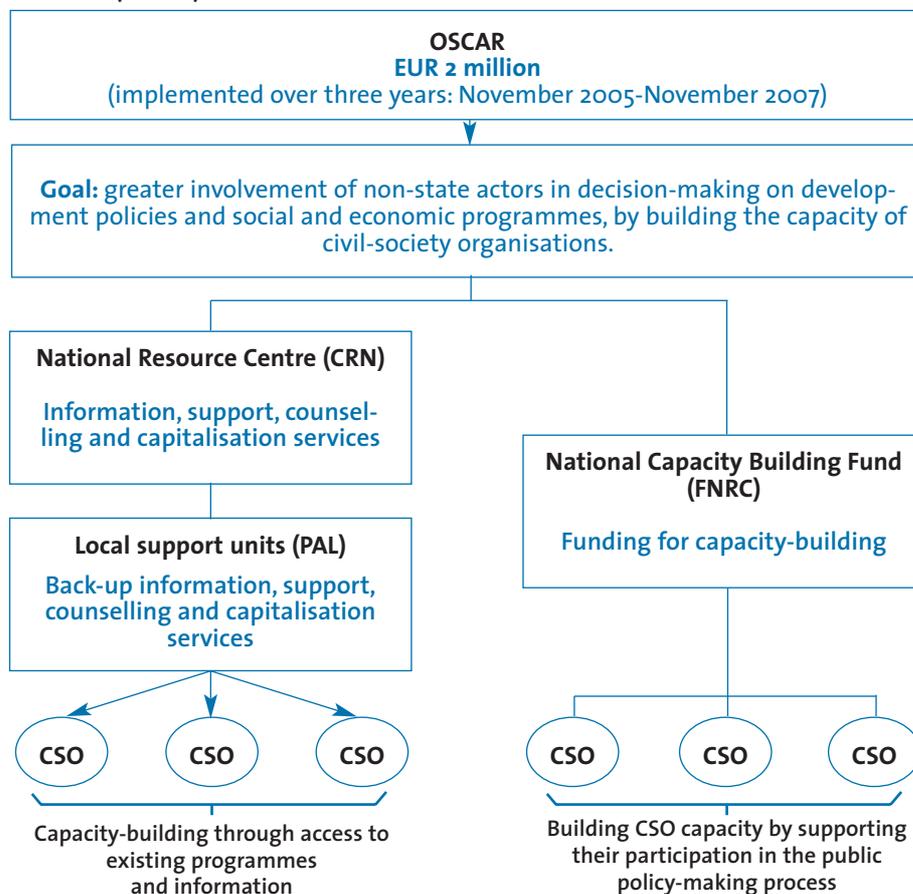
Further structuring. In order to establish itself as a key discussion partner, PASCIB intends to strengthen its position at a grass-roots level and provide a comprehensive framework for consultation. It plans to start with a number of representative groups (i.e. its current members) and gradually persuade other organisations to join it by achieving results and guaranteeing transparent procedures.

However, at its current stage of development, it is not yet fully functional, and is still run by a small group of exceptionally dynamic individuals. Some of the umbrella organisations that have joined it have their own agendas and do not always inform their members of PASCIB's role. At the same time, various organisations and groups of actors that are highly proficient advocates, and whose involvement in a tripartite dialogue with the EU is of vital importance, are not members of the platform. So far, civil-society representation in Benin still looks like being based on a top-down approach, despite the genuine desire for

popular representation on the part of its leaders. The question is thus whether PASCIB, which is without doubt a valuable network, can work more closely with other organisations that have true social legitimacy and with organisations whose technical and operational legitimacy is well established. In partnership with the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, which is supporting them in this project, PASCIB delegations are travelling all over the country to inform people about the Cotonou Partnership Agreement and set up local branches. Whilst such activities help to ensure that the platform is recognised, there are alternative channels,²⁰ and PASCIB will need to identify and perform certain 'niche' activities if it is to overcome the continued reluctance of some CSOs to join it.

OSCAR: opportunities and risks. OSCAR marks the advent of a direct support programme for non-state actors in Benin and their direct access to 9th EDF resources, establishing participation as a fundamental principle as set out in the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. It comprises two distinct, complementary pillars:

Figure 5 Programme for Supported and Strengthened Civil-Society Organisations (OSCAR)



- (1) direct financing of civil-society projects (through the National Capacity-Building Fund);
- (2) capacity-building (through the National Resource Centre).

This is thus a major step with real potential for strengthening the position of non-state actors, both as fully-fledged discussion partners in the public policy-making process and as service-providers or partners in implementing programmes. The independence of the new National Resource Centre, which is run by neutral technical assistants and has links at local level (in the form of local support units), reduces the risks of co-optation and thus encourages many actors to join it.

OSCAR does not directly fund the type of organisational support (i.e. operating costs, equipment, etc.) that is so essential to the strengthening of many CSOs. However, this type of support may still be provided if it forms part of an activity in which a given resource is not an end in itself but a necessary means of achieving the desired result.

The aim of the NAO and the EC delegation in setting up this programme is to strengthen links among local actors and their ties with representative bodies. For example, the programme can help PASCIB (or other representative bodies) to respond to requests from CSOs for advocacy support or assist them in their efforts to become involved in decision-making processes. OSCAR should therefore be able to help CSOs move beyond the 'hand-out rationale' and play a role both operationally and in a strategic dialogue, by facilitating the flow of vital information and strengthening their advocacy capacity while relying on existing initiatives.

However, the creation of an additional body and the associated technical assistance may well absorb a considerable proportion of the available funds. Links with the Centre for the Promotion of Civil Society, a public-private consultation framework attached to the ministry responsible for relations with civil society (MCRI-SCBE), and the ministry's own substantial role raise a number of questions. Could continuing distrust between non-state actors and the ministry adversely affect OSCAR or influence the selection of projects? Is there any way of preventing overlaps between the Centre for the Promotion of Civil Society and OSCAR? What guarantees are there to ensure that the process is followed-up beyond OSCAR (National Resource Centre, local branches, etc.)?

Apart from the impact of its activities, the programme thus provides an opportunity to learn about ways and means of building CSO

capacity in Benin. It is therefore essential that the parties learn from the experience and reinvest their knowledge in future opportunities for dialogue on strategy and funding (i.e. the new PRSP, the 10th EDF and so on).

Links between national participation and the global advocacy strategy. The ACP Civil-Society Forum, an ad-hoc body set up in 1997, has played a valuable informational role in promoting the structuring of non-state actors at a national level. For example, efforts by ENDA-TM, the regional focal point for West Africa, to spread information about the issues raised by the Cotonou Partnership Agreement have directly encouraged NGOs in Benin to organise themselves. Regional and global representation to ensure effective advocacy on the ACP-EU cooperation strategy and the implementation of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement remains relevant and continues to be called for by national platforms, including in Benin. Such representation needs to be based on the presence of an effective organisation of non-state actors from the grass-roots level upwards.²¹

In order to ensure that national platforms are the basis for the forum legitimacy, it should no longer be considered as an ad-hoc body. Since it was set up nearly ten years ago, CSOs have become more structured in line with the provisions of the Cotonou Partnership Agreement. The now large number of national platforms in ACP countries means that an agenda can be negotiated for reshaping the forum by consulting its members, the national platforms. Joining forces to draw up articles of association, a mandate and rules of procedure is now the most effective way of formally endorsing the existence of a global (i.e. ACP-wide) representative body, as well as of enhancing its legitimacy among its members and enabling it to seek funding as a legal entity in its own right - two essential factors if the organisation is to become more effective. However, various questions need to be answered with regard to representation:

- How is information on cooperation to be circulated?
- How are the ideas and proposals put forward by the ACP representative body to be disseminated on the ground?
- How are the Forum's means of acquiring information and taking action to be enhanced (i.e. the organised exchange of local information, communication between individuals, the use of the media, establishment of grass-roots discussion groups, etc.)?
- Can PASCIB, which has representation issues of its own, communicate its experi-

ence to members of the forum as a basis for further discussion?

Formalised dialogue: collaboration with local elected representatives and state actors.

Various initiatives have demonstrated broad support for the idea of a dialogue on public policy priorities and cooperation strategies embracing non-state actors. However, the arrangements for such a dialogue, its frequency and its likely impact on the decision-making process are far less clear. Yet this is the whole point of multi-actor dialogue. There is still a need for strategic alliances between CSOs and state actors, especially the locally elected representatives, the National Assembly, the government and also with the EC delegation. Rather than worry about how officially established such dialogue is, what matters is ensuring that information is exchanged and circulates regularly. This is one current aim of PASCIB, which intends to enhance its local presence and also play an active role in consultations with ministries. Representativeness is a crucial issue both for PASCIB and for the other umbrella organisations that are investing in advocacy. If it is to establish itself as a strategic discussion partner with a role to play in monitoring the Cotonou Partnership Agreement or national policies in general on behalf of non-state actors, PASCIB could:

- limit its radius of action and be recognised by its members as capable of shouldering this task;
- have a genuine 'spokesperson' capacity, i.e. be capable of developing effective intermediary mechanisms for gathering and summarising information (i.e. grass-roots concerns voiced by members, local branches, etc.);
- acknowledge the constraints placed on its official partners, move beyond the climate of institutional distrust and invest in the quality of its input in order to increase its impact.

A proactive attitude is to be adopted in order to establish firm working links with national policy-makers.

Notes

- ¹ World Bank, *World Development Indicators database*, August 2005.
- ² Among these are the Support Project for the Development of the Sub-Prefectures, the Support Programme for the Promotion of Good Governance and the Support Programme for the National Poverty Reduction Strategy.
- ³ With some notable exceptions, such as trafficking in children, which involves tens of thousands of children both in Benin and abroad.
- ⁴ The amounts involved are between 100 and 500 CFA francs (CFAF) per capita per annum (*Country Strategy Evaluation - Benin*, summary report, Volume 1, main report, evaluation elaborated by EGEVAL, February 2005. This document is in French).
- ⁵ In 2002, twenty-seven magistrates, forty-five judicial officers, nineteen treasury officials and eight others were sent to prison following the discovery that an estimated CFAF 8 billion had been embezzled by members of the judicial system (2003 joint report by the European Commission delegation and the Ministry of Finance and the Economy).
- ⁶ Ordinance No. 59/PR/MDRC of 28 December 1966 promulgating the general statute on cooperation.
- ⁷ Diagnosis of the operation of NGOs and proposal for a strategic framework for action, by Faustin Djagba, on behalf of UNDP and the Centre for the Promotion of Non-Governmental Associations and Organisations (CPA-ONG), May 2003. This document is in French.
- ⁸ Mestre C., Tomety S.-N., *État des lieux de la situation de la société civile au Bénin et orientations pour le renforcement de ses capacités*, summary document, CIEDEL, October 2004.
- ⁹ Excerpt from the 2000 annual report by the European Commission delegation.
- ¹⁰ Gahou, E., and A. Atidegla. 2002. Participation of civil society in the preparation of the cooperation strategy of the EU-ACP agreement for Benin: a civil society perspective. Cotonou/ Brussels: GRAPAD/Eurostep.)
- ¹¹ *Country Strategy Evaluation - Benin*, summary report, Volume 1, main report, evaluation elaborated by EGEVAL, February 2005. This document is in French.
- ¹² One staff member was in fact recruited by the EC in July 2003 to support CSOs for this very purpose.
- ¹³ Mestre C., Tomety S.-N., *État des lieux de la situation de la société civile au Bénin et orientations pour le renforcement de ses capacités*, summary document, CIEDEL, October 2004.
- ¹⁴ A maximum budget of EUR 505,000, funded from the 9th EDF, was provided for this purpose.
- ¹⁵ GRAPAD had previously conducted a study on trafficking in women in Benin on behalf of ENDA-TM.
- ¹⁶ Organised in collaboration with the ECDPM and funded by Belgium, the seminar was held in Porto Novo on 10 and 11 October 2002.
- ¹⁷ Set up under the terms of Act No. 90-032 of 11 December 1990 promulgating the Constitution of the Republic of Benin (Sections 139, 140 and 141).
- ¹⁸ MCRI-SCBE, set up by Decree No. 99-515 of 2 November 1999.
- ¹⁹ CSP and NIP for the period 2002-2007, April 2002.
- ²⁰ One example is the Social Watch initiative. Focusing on the negotiation of the next PRSP, it is working with various organisations (some of which are members of PASCIB) and achieving results (i.e. formulating recommendations based on its members' interests).
- ²¹ Conclusions of the Brussels conference on the participation of non-state actors in ACP-EU cooperation, Brussels, July 2001.

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List of acronyms and abbreviations

ACP	Africa, Caribbean and Pacific	GDP	Gross Domestic Product
CBDD	Benin Sustainable Development Centre	GRAPAD	Research and Action Group for the Promotion of Agriculture and Development
CES	Economic and Social Council		
CNDLP	National Committee for Development and Poverty Reduction	IMF	International Monetary Fund
		MCRI-SCBE	Ministry responsible for relations with institutions, civil society and expatriate Beninese citizens
CPA-ONG	Centre for the Promotion of Non-Governmental Associations and Organisations	MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
CPSC	Centre for the Promotion of Civil Society	MTR	Mid-term review
CRN	National Resource Centre	NAO	National Authorising Officer
CS	Cooperation strategy	NGO	Non-governmental organisation
CSA-Bénin	Benin Association of Independent Trade Unions	NIP	National Indicative Programme
CSO	Civil society organisation	NLTPSs	National Long-Term Perspective Studies
EC	European Commission	OSCAR	Programme for Supported and Strengthened Civil-Society Organisations
EDF	European Development Fund		
ENDA-TM	Environment and Development in the Third World	PADSP	Support Project for the Development of the Sub-Prefectures
EO	Executive Office		
EPA	Economic Partnership Agreement	PAG	Government Action Programme
EU	European Union	PAL	Local Support Unit
FENAB	Benin National Federation of Craftspeople	PAPBG	Support Programme for the Promotion of Good Governance
FENAPEB	Benin National Federation of Associations of Parents of Schoolchildren	PASCIB	Benin Platform for Civil-Society Actors
FES	Friedrich Ebert Foundation	PASNAREP	Support Programme for the National Poverty Reduction Strategy
FNRC	National Capacity Building Fund		
FONGEB	Forum of European Non-Governmental Organisations in Benin	PRSP	Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper
FOSAC	Forum of Non-Government Organisations monitoring the Cotonou Partnership Agreement	REJEB	Benin Network of Economic Journalists
		ROSYB	Benin Network of Trade Union Organisations
		SAP	Structural Adjustment Programme
FUPRO	Benin Federation of Unions of Producers	UNDP	United Nations Development Programme

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Benin-European Union, Cooperation Strategy and 2002-2007 National Indicative Programme
http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/csp_rsp/print/bj_csp_fr.pdf#zoom=100

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http://europa.eu.int/comm/development/body/csp_rsp/addendum/Add_CSP_BJ.pdf#zoom=100

Benin Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper.

World Bank
<http://web.worldbank.org/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/AFRICAEXT/BENINEXTN/0,,menuPK:322653~pagePK:141132~piPK:141123~theSitePK:322639,00.html>

PASCIB-Friedrich Ebert Foundation, Assessment of the National Indicative Programme (NIP) by civil society in Benin and proposals for the Mid-Term Review. Study report, Cotonou, October 2004.

<http://www.fes.de/cotonou/indexdownloads2.htm>
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