

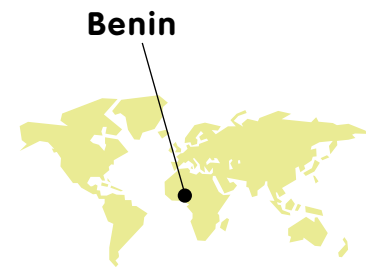
# Supporting NGO networks

Through the support of NGO networks,  
the excluded should get a voice

Capacity Development Illustrated



In October 2006, three members of 'les Sœurs Uniés à l'Oeuvre', (Social Watch Benin) – a local advocacy network established in 2004 with support from SNV – visited the education department to investigate the embezzlement of funds allocated for the construction of new educational offices in the town of Ifangni, Benin. Four men had misappropriated



**42 per cent of the 3,639,900 CFA-francs provided by the schools of the district. Among the perpetrators were the former head of the educational office of Ifangni and the president of the coordinating parents' associations.**

### Stimulating involvement

A week after its initial visit, the Social Watch team arranged a meeting with board members of the parents' associations in Ifangni to discuss the misappropriation of funds in their district, and encourage them to take appropriate action. This also provided an opportunity to raise local awareness about the network's activities.

At the end of the meeting, the parents agreed to cooperate with teachers, in order to render management of their schools more transparent and efficient. They expressed great interest in the network and asked for training to enable them to monitor the use of public resources, particularly with regard to the district budget and the implementation of the MDGs.

Subsequently, a press conference was organised to inform journalists about the handling of the case, and to discuss the widespread problem of corruption in Ifangni: in addition to the misuse of education funds, other well-known cases included the health centre in Banigbé, and the Union of Sport associations of primary schools, all of which had been plagued by embezzlement.

The Ifangni unit of Social Watch also convened a meeting with its seven member organisations to report on its activities. Participants expressed satisfaction with the proactive approach taken by the local unit, which was in line with the vision articulated by the country's new leaders, aimed at

improving governance structures and achieving real changes in the behaviour of citizens.

Promoting transparency in public administration While the government of Benin has prioritised the MDGs in its national development policy, targets are often not met and corruption has risen to unprecedented levels in recent years. Social Watch Benin was set up to help reverse this sorry trend by monitoring the use of funding for basic services to ensure greater efficiency and effectiveness.

A network of more than 120 NGOs, with local units in 12 municipalities, Social Watch mobilises civil society around the main themes of the Benin Poverty Reduction Strategy, and the MDGs, particularly on poverty reduction and improving basic services. The network seeks to promote transparency and equality by publishing reports and carrying out public informing activities. Social Watch and its network NGOs also perform a watchdog role by monitoring the performance of civil servants, investigating a broad range of governance issues on behalf of the public, from complaints about the issuing of a birth certificate to inadequate water and electricity supplies.

### A busy year

In 2006, Social Watch Benin helped to bridge the micro-macro divide in a variety of ways. In March, it participated in the monitoring of the presidential elections. With the support of local



civil society organisations, the 12 Social Watch units played a major role in ensuring relatively free and fair elections.

To further leverage the mobilisation potential of the campaigns, Social Watch took the opportunity to raise awareness about the MDGs, using a variety of channels, including radio and television.

Through the twelve thematic groups based on the twelve Millennium Targets, supported by a technical committee of national experts, the network carried out consultations that culminated in an alternative civil society report on the MDGs.

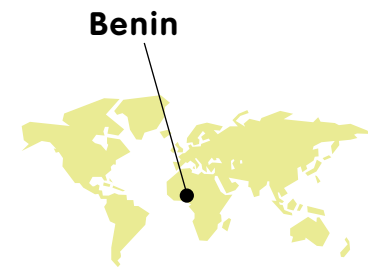


Furthermore, Social Watch organised a number of regional sessions to provide input to the national debate on the second document for the Poverty Reduction Strategy. A document was prepared and discussed with the national committee responsible for the strategy. The network also trained its members on how to monitor the national budget, especially the implementation of funds earmarked for local communities.

### What did SNV do?

- Provide advisory services and coaching to build the capacity of the network;
- Maintain close cooperation with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, which has included Social Watch as an important partner on its governance programme;
- Promote knowledge-sharing on project design and implementation;
- Facilitate the input of civil society in the preparation of the second Benin Poverty Reduction Strategy;
- Provide support for further resource mobilisation, including promoting knowledge-sharing on writing project proposals;
- Link up Social Watch Benin to similar initiatives in other African countries, resulting in exchange visits and participation at several international forums;

This support amounted to 118 direct advisory days in 2006.



## Lessons learned

The importance of building a strong alliance across a broad range of actors was a key lesson learned. The unity forged was critical in mobilising broad-based public involvement around the MDGs. Ironically, its very success has made Social Watch very attractive to, and dependent upon, external donors. There is concern about the continued ownership of members, as evidenced by continuing difficulties in collecting membership fees. While a core group of seven or eight organisations remains committed to the goals of the network, the overall impression is that most members are primarily motivated by the benefits that they can draw from the platform.

## Impact

Through its activities in 2006, Social Watch has established itself as an important player in Benin society. The network succeeded in raising awareness on a number of issues related to the Millennium Development Goals, especially poverty and gender, education, health, and water. Its contribution to redressing gender inequality in Benin is particularly noteworthy: the head of the network Huguette Akplogan-Dossa is a woman, and there are many more active women members, which in turn has inspired more women to join and put specific 'gender' issues on the agenda.

## Key Achievements

- Success in bridging the micro-macro divide;
- Promoting transparency in public administration and allocation of funds;
- Promoting gender equality;
- Strengthening existing NGOs rather than establishing new ones.