

Benin: Workshops unexpected outcomes and impacts

How information can be exchanged and used

Authors: Mouftaou Gado,
Erick Johnson,
Geert Kroon

In September 2007, SNV-Benin joined the Netherlands Royal Embassy (EKN) in Benin in providing advisory services to the government about its water & sanitation (w&s) services. This advice is part of a 5 year w&s programme (PPEA) which will assist in the decentralisation of these services. The Netherlands' financial contribution for this period is about 53.4 million Euros.

Managing existing w&s infrastructure, and planning, implementing and managing future w&s infrastructure, is to become a municipal – rather than national or regional – responsibility. The skills required therefore need to be transferred from national and regional level w&s departments to municipality technicians. At the same time, another challenge is to increase access to w&s from 36% in 2001 to 67% in 2015. SNV's clients are 39 of the 77 municipalities in Benin, as well as all regional w&s services, the latter changing their role from planning/building to technical assistance/advice.

In order to evaluate the progress of the sector competence transfer process, regional w&s services, in collaboration with SNV, organised regional workshops. The main objective of the workshops was to inform participants about legal and practical aspects of the decentralisation process and the PPEA programme. Another aim of the workshops was to find out the strengths and weaknesses of actors, to look for solutions to cope with those findings and to come up with recommendations to local and national government, as well as to technical and financial w&s sector partners. Many questions were asked and answered, often by participants themselves.

The PPEA programme follows the Paris 2005 declaration principles, and therefore channels funds through the national network (Trésor). During the first workshop it was discovered that the procedures for fund transfer via districts to municipalities were not known, because they had never been practised. Workshop participants from

the Ministry of Finance (MF) were embarrassed when they discovered mistakes in their transfer handling, but emerged wiser in the end. After this first workshop, MF staff held training sessions at both district and municipal level, in order to teach the money transfer process. They reviewed the transfers that had been already initiated, but had become stuck, cancelled these and initiated others in the correct fashion.

The first workshop was organised in mid-August. MF's training sessions started in September and, by the end of the month, the transfer of the funds for w&s planning and infrastructure was re-initiated. On November 21st, during one of the regional workshops, the first transfers arrived at district level: MF district staff came with this news to the workshop and at its end wrote out payment orders to municipalities.

The initial workshop objectives were met; the other outcomes and impacts were readily accepted, not only at district and municipal, but also at national, level and by the EKN. As SNV-Benin's Director, Amagoïn Keita concluded: "SNV-Benin connects peoples' capacities". The transfer of competences is now being accompanied by a transfer of resources, as requested by municipalities during the workshops.