

The challenge of decentralisation: Linking national and local authorities in Niger

Author: **Brigitte Dia**

Country: **SNV Niger**

Practice Area: **Responsive and Accountable Local Governance**

Summary

Just days after the first municipal elections were held in Niger in July 2004 it became clear that a directive describing the procedures for installing the newly elected councils had yet to be issued. SNV Niger was able to utilise its good relations at national and local levels to bring the parties together in a one-day workshop where they worked together to formulate the required directive. As a result, the directive was issued just in time to avert a situation that could have seriously undermined the credibility of the decentralisation process. The workshop took only one day, but illustrates how SNV's approach, 'connecting people's capacities', can be used to maximum effect.

Municipal elections in Niger

On 24 July 2004 the first ever municipal elections were held in Niger, which resulted in a major restructuring of the country's administrative and governance systems. Before the elections, the country had been divided into 36 provinces (*préfectures*), headed by state-appointed governors (*préfets*). Today, Niger is neatly divided into 265 much smaller districts (*communes*), each with its own democratically elected council and mayor (*maire*).

Everyone – the population, development organisations and donors – had high expectations of the elections, and were looking forward to the transfer of many responsibilities from the national to the district level. Thus important decisions on ways to encourage local development and to alleviate poverty would be taken much closer to the citizens. The elections had already been postponed several times, and in order to keep up the momentum it was essential to install the newly elected councils as quickly as possible. The decentralisation law stipulates that this must be done within 15 days after the official declaration of the election results.

In a vast and sparsely populated country like Niger, holding national elections is a huge effort. However, making decentralisation actually work represents an even greater challenge. Many organisations have assisted in the process of decentralisation, mostly with donor-financed programmes that focus on building the institutional capacities of the new local authorities. However, few of these organisations actually have the required competencies, resources and independence (particularly from donors and their preoccupation with how 'their' money is being spent) to build effective, advisory relationships with all the stakeholders involved – including local civil society organisations and various levels of government, as well as the new mayors and district councils.

SNV Niger

Since SNV changed its approach to focus on capacity building, the advisers in Niger have invested considerable effort in building effective partnerships with government institutions and civil society organisations at both national and local levels. In the months before the elections, SNV had selected some 50 districts in several provinces where it would focus its efforts to assist the existing provincial governors, as well as the future mayors and district councils, to enable them to assume their new roles and responsibilities.

SNV had established such a partnership with the governor of Kollo province, in southwest Niger. Along with his colleagues in the 35 other provinces, the governor would

be responsible for formally transferring authority to the mayors of the 11 new districts in the province. He therefore asked for SNV's advice on how he could best support them.

Some 10 days after the election, an SNV adviser visited the governor of Kollo, and found that he was still waiting for a directive containing official instructions from the Ministry of the Interior on how to install the councils. He needed to know how each newly elected council, at its first session, should elect a mayor and a deputy from among the members, and then the procedures for officially transferring authority to the new mayor. Although the staff of the governor's office had their own ideas on how this could be done, moving without instructions from the central government was out of the question.

This lack of communication and cooperation between national and provincial levels of government may seem remarkable, but it is not uncommon in Niger. Thus, the SNV adviser visited the Ministry of the Interior's National Directorate of Decentralisation and raised the problem facing the governor of Kollo. The Ministry suddenly realised that this important practical aspect of issuing the instructions on the procedures for installing the new councils was urgent unfinished business. SNV was asked to assist.

Connecting capacities

The offices of the governor of Kollo and of the National Directorate of Decentralisation in Niamey are located just 30 kilometres apart. SNV therefore suggested organising a one-day workshop that would bring together the staff of the two offices to find a mutually acceptable solution. The governor and the Directorate agreed. During the workshop, facilitated by SNV, the participants developed a directive containing the instructions needed by the governors. Within a few days, just within the 15-day period stipulated in the decentralisation law, the National Directorate was able to issue a directive to all governors containing clear instructions on how to transfer their authority to the 265 newly elected mayors and councils. They were thus able to avert a situation that could have seriously undermined the credibility of the entire decentralisation process.

Both parties appreciated SNV's initiative in organising the workshop, and the process of collaboration. The governor of Kollo expressed his gratitude that 'for once we were not bombarded with instructions from the capital', but had been fully consulted in the their formulation. For their part, the Ministry officials acknowledged that the directive could not have been formulated in such a short time without the inputs of the staff of the governor's office. It later became apparent that this had been the first time that the staff of the Ministry and a provincial authority had worked together to develop such a directive. Both parties felt that they had learned a great deal from the experience. They not only recognised the value of working together, but were also more aware of the rationale and the need for decentralisation – to enable decisions about the organisation and development of communities to be made much closer to the people.

Minimal work with maximum effect

Although the workshop itself took just one day, the fact that it took place at all was a considerable achievement. SNV Niger was in a position to be effective in bringing the two parties together because of its good relations at both national and provincial levels. SNV has built up these relationships over many years of fruitful cooperation, in particular with the national agencies responsible for the implementation of the decentralisation process, in particular the High Commission for Administrative Reform and Decentralisation (HCRAD) and later the National Directorate of Decentralisation of the Ministry of the Interior.

The challenge continues

In February 2005 another obstacle emerged that is preventing the district councils getting on with their work. This time it involves the transfer of human resources and budgets from the provincial to the respective district administrations. It appears that this will be possible only after a special government committee has conducted a final audit of

the books of the provincial governments. As this committee has limited resources (which is not unusual in Niger), and the country lacks certified state auditors who can do the job, meeting this requirement is likely to take some time.

Thus we're back at lesson one of development work: 'those who can't afford a car will have to travel by donkey, so just relax and enjoy the ride'!

For further information, please contact Brigitte Dia (email: brigitte.dia@snv.ne)

Ressources

Haut Commissariat à la Réforme Administrative et la Décentralisation / High Commission for Administrative Reform and Decentralisation (HCRAD), *Recueil des textes sur la décentralisation*, May 2003.

HCRAD, *La décentralisation, questions et réponses concernant la commune*, 2004.

DED/GTZ/KFW/SNV, *Guide pratique d'installation d'une commune au Niger*, January 2005.

Fonds Belge de Survie, *Analyse de la problématique de la décentralisation au Niger*, rapport d'un mission d'identification, November 2004.

[3 photos] The election of the mayor and deputy mayoress in Keita district in central Niger.