

CASE STUDY 76

Pilot Accountability Initiative to improve public access to drinking water and sanitation in the villages of Dogbo, Ouinhi and Sinendé, Niger.

Authors/ Advisor Names: Edouard T. Fagnon

Country and sector: Niger, Domestic accountability, WASH

Context

The crucial goal of decentralisation is to succeed in implementing a system of governance which is better in touch with local reality and within the grasp of local populations. Introducing and practicing fair and ethical management of public goods is the key to having any chance of success in developing into a prosperous country. Accountability is a principle of good governance, a prerequisite which cannot be ignored in exercising democracy, building citizenship, sharing equal access to basic services and moreover in the struggle to have sustainable development replace poverty.

The concept of accountability is not new. The decentralisation laws stipulate that elected officials are obliged to keep the population informed about what they do. (Cf. law N°98-007: art. 33 and 52; loi N°97-029: art. 2; 18; 22; 23; 34 and 64).

However, two decades after democratic renewal and more than six years of decentralisation and local governance, the laws have not yet been applied. This is highlighted by a weak if not absent culture of accountability which should link leaders or elected officials and their constituents, the beneficiaries of public services. For the most part, local inhabitants do not know that they have the right to hold elected officials accountable, and the officials often behave irresponsibly towards the electorate.

In this context, the Domestic Accountability project was launched in a pilot phase by the Netherlands Development Organisation (SNV) Benin office, in partnership with the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, the Association of Netherlands Municipalities (VNG International) and local actors. The accountability project engages two types of participants: those who supply basic services and those who use them.

The challenge is to set up efficient dialogue which will improve people's access to basic services, in particular drinking water and sanitation. The effort focuses on reinforcing management skills in order to better fulfil their role in this sector, as well as accompanying civil society organisations and other village structures as they exercise their role in acting as counterweight in the sector.

Of the three partners in the accountability initiative, SNV/Benin engages directly with village actors. SNV has also seized this opportunity to promote good governance, in, for example, facilitating the first generation of development plans in more than 30 villages around the country. This along with other factors justifies SNV's role in coordinating the initiative and promoting village skills and structures put in place to improve drinking water infrastructure and to ensure access to high quality water and sanitation services.

Client

The village represents the space and the entity where local governance is best expressed and is thereby the most appropriate location for accountability as envisioned by the accountability project. At this level, the targeted actors are the mayor, his village council and the town hall officials, as far as supply is concerned; demand comes from the civil society organisations ALCRER and Social Watch, representing the citizens. These actors benefit from capacity reinforcement support from SNV Benin. In the interest of engendering a sustainable accountability practice, the goal is to encourage the creation of an environment favourable to the establishment of an effective dialogue between those elected and the civil society, relying on local capacity reinforcement structures (Social Watch and ALCRER) present in each of the three pilot villages.

Intervention logic and methods

To reinforce the skills of different actors, SNV Benin intervenes on three levels:

Outline of action plans for different actors

SNV Benin has outlined and harmonised plans of action for the different actors involved in the initiative's implementation. We first consulted with civil society organisations and the private sector (Social Watch, ALCRER and Lid Management), followed by structures intervening in the water and sanitation sector, including PNE (Partenariat National de L'Eau), CREPA (Centre Régional d'Eau Potable et d'Assainissement), DGEau (Direction Générale de l'Eau), DHAB (Direction de l'Hygiène et de l'Assainissement de Base), DAT (Délégation à l'Aménagement du Territoire) and ANCB (l'Association Nationale des Communes du Bénin). The consultations were rounded off in the pilot villages. SNV also facilitated the recording of concrete results, definition of monitoring guidelines and the desired visible results at the conclusion of the intervention. Timetables for implementation of the work were drawn up.

Implementation of action plans

As the focal point of the pilot project, SNV Benin coordinates the activities to be sure of achieving results. A consultant responsible for facilitation of the action plan implementation has been assigned to each participating village. The consultants, two women and one man, provide back-up for skills required by the different actors in carrying out the plan; they organise data collection not only for initial insights into the state of water and sanitation infrastructure, but also into their accessibility as well as the citizens' level of satisfaction with these services.

They supply information about the action plan guidelines as indicated by the timetable, and they produce monthly reports accounting for progress as well as the challenges to be overcome in harmony with the local government.

On the one hand, they accompany the municipal officials in installing drinking water consumers' groups, and on the other hand, SNV also works with the OSC (Organisations de la Société Civile) in triggering participation by groups of citizens. They safeguard the proper function of local structures which have been put into place.

Monitoring and evaluation of action plan implementation

The SNV Benin advisor coordinates the project and keeps track of the activities of the consultants in the villages.

S/he organises monthly planning sessions, studies of the project and accreditation of reports issued by the different actors. S/he ensures good communication among the various actors, organises and leads the bimonthly meetings of partners and trimonthly gatherings of those involved in active implementation of the project.

S/he pays field visits to monitor the quality of work completed and get feedback from the actors, as well as arranging site visits for the partners¹. S/he watches over timetable requirements for project results and alerts partners to adjustments and alterations necessary for the success of the plan.

Outcome

Thanks to various forms of support from SNV Benin:

- The basic situation concerning drinking water and sanitation infrastructure is known in the villages
- Information is distributed and reports are made available in the villages on a monthly basis about water and sanitation guidelines
- Three drinking water monitoring associations are up and running in two villages
- Inhabitants (elected and electorate) are informed about accountability and aware of its positive effects on local development
- The number of local observers present at municipal council meetings has increased by at least 50% in each village

Impact

After eight months of effective implementation of the accountability project, there are visible results on the village level. These include:

- Better understanding of the people and mechanisms involved in accountability practice in the three villages
- A new dynamic in the water and sanitation sector which translates into regular monitoring of guidelines and the availability of statistics on the practicality rate of work completed, the percentage of drinking water coverage and the number of people with new awareness in the three villages
- In all of the pilot villages, notices are displayed carrying the content of town hall meetings
- The founding of a forum for development actors in the villages and the registration of a budget heading for forum activities

Lessons learnt

- The decentralisation laws on accountability are unfamiliar or unknown to both local authorities and ordinary citizens
- Accountability issues pit civil society against elected officials and they must be tackled properly to avoid triggering socio-political conflicts
- Accountability brings multiple actors into the process, and good communication among all those involved is crucial
- If the work is to endure, one must work with and reinforce existing local dynamics

¹ In April, SNV Benin's National Director paid a visit to offer monitoring and advisory-support to Ouinhi village, a member of the DA initiative. The Netherlands Ambassador to Benin also visited Dogbo and Ouinhi villages for monitoring and advisory-support purposes in June 2010.

Photos and quotes

'A mayor who correctly practices accountability can guarantee himself another term, as he will have displayed a transparent management style, and this will be well appreciated by constituents.' The Mayor of the village of Aguégué.

'We mayors are becoming more aware of the importance of accountability on the local level and we put it into practice more professionally. I would like to ask our partners who work with us to carry the interest to actors on regional and national levels because they are even more in need of this knowledge.' The Mayor of Quinhi.



Participants at the National Accountability Exchange Workshop in Cotonou



Partners' Opening Addresses to the workshop, July 15, 2010. From Left to Right: EKN Representative, SNV-Benin Country Director, MDGLAAT Representative, VNG International Representative



Itemised accountability listings in the village of Sinendé . July 2010