

The Experience of Social Watch Benin
"Watching over the Development Process"
Interview: Dieudonné Houinsou, Executive Secretary, Social Watch Benin

In your view, what is the specific value of human rights in fighting poverty?

Fighting poverty must not be seen by governments and others as an act of charity. The main objectives of national or local development policies should be to focus on fighting poverty as the right of different communities. The MDGs and the Poverty Reduction Strategies (PRS) can help to achieve human rights by raising the level of well-being and protecting poor and marginalized groups.

What do you believe the UN can do to ensure human rights are brought into the national development process?

Many of the national or local authorities and their partners are not informed about human rights. A large part of Civil Society and the communities know nothing about Human Rights standard and principles. Therefore, the first step that has to be made is to educate and sensitize authorities and society on human rights standards and principles; in particular the cross-cutting nature of human rights- the fact that human rights cut across all sectors.. Development aid is still understood as charity and not as a human rights issue. There is a need to disseminate the Universal Declaration of Human Rights among all those involved in elaborating and implementing Development Policies- national and local authorities, NGO activists, local youth associations, women, rural labourers and other opinion leaders, so that they can be inspired by it and use it.

The second step is to promote the principles of participation, inclusion, accountability, alternative monitoring and evaluation in order to focus the development strategy on the real needs of the communities.

What is the role of Social Watch in monitoring the PRSP process?

Social Watch works to encourage society to take part in the PRSP process. In the drafting process of Benin's Second National PRSP, Social Watch Benin collaborated with other Civil Society Organizations (CSOs), to organize data to be collected in all the 77 Municipalities of Benin. The data collected focused on:

- i) How communities perceive poverty, and
- ii) The main needs of the communities for their own local development.

In parallel, we worked with the National Committee responsible for drafting the National PRSP II. This Committee was originally only composed and led by representatives from government, but after negotiations and advocacy, Social Watch Benin was permitted one or two participants to work with it.

Social Watch Benin's members then used the data and views gathered in the localities to influence the work of the Committee. This was done by synthesizing the data into a document called: "Civil Society's Contributions to the elaboration of the

PRSP II in Benin" and transmitting it to the Committee. This enabled the information from the data collected to be directly incorporated into the PRSP II.

Once the first draft of the PRSP II was ready, Social Watch Benin went back to the communities to include their opinions in the document. These opinions were again synthesized and sent to the National Committee so as to be incorporated into the final document.

The result of this work and lobbying was that most of the suggestions made by the communities were reflected in the final paper. Communities are very happy to know that they are part of the process of developing the PRSP II. More than 700 CSOs in Benin, working in the country's 77 Municipalities, participated in the process and worked with different categories of the population, the poorest and the neglected.

Does your work explicitly draw on human rights standards and principles?

Human rights are not explicitly mentioned in our work because for many of the literate population in the country, human rights are equated with political prisoners' rights, Amnesty International, advocacy for expression of libertyŠetc. Not that these are wrong at all, but they are not automatically associated with poverty reduction and development. However, we base our work on three fundamental human rights principles: participation, inclusion and accountability.

On Inclusion: In monitoring the implementation of the PRSP we have developed local strategies to monitor whether the money reaches the poor and marginalized groups. The PRSP does not identify where the money will be spent, so we need to be vigilant and ensure that it reaches the poorest communities.

On Participation: To maximize the beneficial impact of the MDGs, people need to be able to take hold of the process themselves. Before Social Watch Benin was created in 2005, people were not aware of the Goals. There was no civil society engagement in the MDG process. Our efforts aim to put the process into their hands. By participating in the development process, people begin to hope for a better future, a positive change, and they expect that change to be realized..

Accountability: In monitoring the MDGs, together with other civil society organizations we produce an annual alternative MDG Report. We also plan to have a quarterly report on each target. It will look at which have improved and which have not. These reports will be widely disseminated through the media and sent to the authorities.

What is Social Watch Benin's approach to developing community capacities?

Social Watch takes a multi-sector approach to developing capacities to be able to adopt a human rights based approach to poverty reduction. To be able to effectively monitor and evaluate the performance of the government, members of local cells need their capacities strengthened on a human rights based approach to poverty reduction and in particular on advocacy, monitoring and evaluation techniques. So too, populations need to know that it is their right to participate in the decision-making process and to be sensitized on standards and principles of human rights. At the same time, the authorities at local, regional and national levels need to be

informed on the human rights based approach to poverty reduction, in order to know how to elaborate good development policies. In doing so, they will be in line with the international conventions to which they have signed up.

In monitoring the development process, local cells identify the specific and monitorable issues they want to focus on. For example, they have identified the problem of budget allocation in hospitals. Money for hospitals has been specifically allocated by the Government to service the poorest groups, but in reality the funds go to those people who have power and/or the right connections. They have also identified the problem of drinkable water. Drinkable water is only available to 70% of the population in Benin. When new wells are built, instead of going to the areas that have no access to drinkable water, sometimes they go to communities that already have wells as a result of political favouritism. Our local cells will thus be following these issues and ensuring that the services go to those groups most in need.

In what way does your work relate to the International Human Rights Machinery?

The work of Social Watch is based on the human rights conventions and the Benin National Constitution. These give the Network the justification to do the 'watching' work that it does.

How can UN Development Agencies contribute to the work of civil society in applying a human rights based approach to development?

- **Raise public awareness on human rights**, particularly on their links with development issues.
- **Support the development of capacity** of all those involved in drafting and implementing development strategies to apply human rights principles and standards: public authorities, NGOs, CSO and communities.
- **Actively engage and partner with CSOs/CS networks**; thereby galvanizing efforts to increase meaningful participation in national or sub-national policy development processes.

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http://www.undp.org/oslocentre/flagship/voices_01.html [Accessed 12 October 2007]