
Fighting poverty in Burkina Faso: How citizens' initiatives exert influence

*Richard Gerster**

“Agricultural policy has to strengthen the backbone of family farms. They daily prove their capabilities. In contrast Agrobusiness had no success stories in Burkina Faso”, asserts Pierre Aimé Ouédraogo of the rural land network GRAF. With this statement the non-governmental organisation (NGO) brought a clear strategic message into the poverty reduction discussion. Their experience in the field contradicts a wide spread prejudice that the family farms' time has run out. “Also people who do not own old money and not live in Ouagadougou are capable of acting in an economic and innovative manner.”

Recognition for grassroots networks

Burkina Faso was one of the first countries which in 2000 formulated a poverty reduction strategy (PRS; “Cadre Stratégiques de Lutte contre la Pauvreté”) in view of debt relief measures. “The required participation

by civil society at first remained wishful thinking”, says Daniel Thiéba who today is coordinating Switzerland's support to NGOs. Some years later the anti poverty strategy was revised, became more target oriented and more broad based. Its implementation is followed by experts in nine thematic working groups and the results are discussed at an annual conference. Civil society organisations play an active role in both the working groups and the annual conference, particularly in the areas of rural development and the fight against corruption. The NGOs want to look over the government's shoulder while it is implementing its policies and to contribute their experiences to making the fight against poverty more effective. Because almost half the population lives below the poverty line of 170 US dollars (82'672 CFA).

Citizens' initiatives in the areas of rural land rights (GRAF), cereal marketing (RVCC),



Family farms put their stamp on agriculture; it is for example the women's job to separate chaff from grain.

drinking water and hygiene (CCEPA) and crafts and trade (FENA-BF) closed ranks in networks. In a first step, they collected data (for example with respect to people's satisfaction with drinking water taps and fountains built by the state) and on that basis made proposals for indicators with which to measure problems and progress of people's livelihoods conditions in the rural areas. For example, building roads should no longer serve as a progress indicator, but rather how it reduces the transport costs and thereby the market prices of sorghum, maize and other products by connecting cultivation areas with consumer regions in a targeted manner.

Initially the government did not listen to the voices from civil society. The proposals were dismissed as being incompetent, not applicable or simply oppositional. "After the 2007 annual PRS meeting I was not sure whether a dialogue would be possible at all in the future", says an NGO representative. But within a short time frame the wind has changed considerably. A strong appearance at the annual conference contributed significantly to that change. Furthermore the NGOs became more professional with

respect to the issues involved as well as their approach. They no longer appear directly before the public, but rather confront the respective government representatives with results of their research. Government representatives as well as municipal councils only find positive judgements with respect to their presented analyses and proposals. However, set backs are not staying away. At the PRS conference of October 2008 a civil society representative again was allocated some speaking time but left an unprepared and disorganised impression.

Nevertheless, the NGOs have achieved a number of things within a short time. Regional data bases have been established. The agricultural ministry has admitted a representative of the land network (GRAF) into its steering committee. In 2007 the interior ministry set up a working group in order to examine NGO proposals. Alliances between citizens' initiatives and representatives in municipal councils emerged. At the same time civil society networks started operating in a coordinated manner and thereby winning political strength. The lack in the state budget's transparency has be-



Since the government makes 900 m² of land available per family, a farmer group of the Yatenga lowlands is not only cultivating rice, but also sorghum and vegetables.

come a topic which received a lot of attention in the public. That way the NGOs' impulses are now affecting results in specific sectors.

Budget support for poverty reduction

On the basis of the poverty reduction strategy six countries, among them Switzerland, and three international organisations (World Bank, African Development Bank, European Union) are co-financing Burkina Faso's state budget. The disbursements are tied to a performance agreement in which the measures, results and their criteria are documented. The ensemble of criteria for the disbursements should only contain indicators which measure progress in the implementation of the anti poverty strategy. That is how civil society contributions also become relevant for budget support even though their organisations are not represented at the annual budget support conference. With respect to analysing the state budget the centre for information, training and studies on the budget (CI-FOEB) plays a decisive role.

Switzerland's lead role

Switzerland is no innocent bystander when it comes to the strengthened role of civil society. Already in 2005/06 it started to strengthen the analytical and conceptual capacities of leading partner organisations. It was important to impart basic knowledge about the state budget. Data bases had to be set up in order to make changes in the region traceable. The NGOs began to see local experiences from a national perspec-



It does not go without saying yet that also women are engaged in self-help groups.

tive. They learned how to work together in networks and form alliances. The communication of research results and conclusions of studies as well as feeding them into the political mechanics are decisive. Switzerland will continue to support the network of citizens' initiatives until at least 2011. In future also other donors such as France will contribute to strengthening civil society's capacities, in order for them to effectively demand accountability from the state with respect to its measures undertaken in the fight against poverty.



A women's group is running a milk collection station and is selling dairy products.

With some civil society representatives one can feel an atmosphere of departure. The NGOs are testing the waters also in the national parliament in order to better support their concerns for a political breakthrough. Civil society is also looking towards Mali: Also with a francophone tradition, decentralisation and civil society participation processes have started earlier and progressed further than in Burkina Faso. The government does not deny that there are deficits. "We know the allegation by civil society that the budget is not transparent.

We are working on improving that", says François Zoundi of the ministry of finance.



A water retention basin built by the state is increasing income and also makes cultivating vegetables possible.

* The author, Dr. Richard Gerster, is an economist and works as independent consultant and publicist (www.gersterconsulting.ch). This article is part of a series commissioned by the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) to take a closer look at budget support from various points of view. They reflect the author's personal opinion.