Benin faces the challenges of environmental depletion, a high population growth rate, a largely informal economy, and weak and obsolete industrial and communication infrastructure. Recognizing such challenges, in 2006 Benin opted for fundamental changes that will transform it over the next 20 years. Through wide consultations and the participation of all constituents of its society, Benin acquired tools enabling it to face its future with more confidence. Major challenges threatening development have been identified, together with corresponding actions to address them.

UNDP has focused its activities on contributing to four national priorities: poverty reduction, the fight against AIDS, access to social services, and the rule of law and a peaceful social climate. The Independent Evaluation Office of UNDP conducted an independent country programme evaluation that covered UNDP work from 2004 to 2008.

UNDP used its comparative advantages, such as its perceived neutrality in the championing of delicate and sensitive macro-level policy subjects, to help Benin take a step forward in combating poverty. Advocacy resulted in resource mobilization from multiple donors, channelled to key activities related to elections and a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper, among others. The adoption of decentralized and participatory mechanisms improved the national capacity to develop pro-poor policies.

In its environment programme, UNDP supported the Ministry of Environment, at both the central and deconcentrated levels, in developing capacities to manage environmental protection and climate change issues. This was accomplished by linking UNDP regional expertise, UN mechanisms and institutions such as the Drylands Development Centre, international donors, local stakeholders and UNDP projects.

Despite the importance of gender issues, these were not given sufficient priority. UNDP targeted women directly through two main interventions: microcredit and a pilot project in leadership training, representation and participation of women in public life. Although women participated and benefited from these projects, the impact of microcredit on women’s income and economic development remained low. It was too early to identify impacts on women’s representation and participation.

In general, UNDP interventions lacked clear directions and indicators to make its contribution on gender issues truly effective.

Almost all projects were linked with national priorities and designed jointly by Benin and UNDP. While contributions to major policy documents such as “Emerging Benin’ were highly strategic, less positive was the relevance of UNDP support to increase the use of social services, under the overall objective of reducing maternal and infant mortality rates and improving health and education. Shortfalls in effectiveness comprised a lack of leadership in supporting the National Institute of Statistics and Economic Analysis with the BenInfo database, and withdrawal from a direct contribution to the fight against corruption.

It was not clear how regional projects, such as the Inventory of Governance in Africa or the Niger River Basin, managed directly by UNDP in New York, contributed to UNDP effectiveness in supporting national objectives. The UNDP coordination role and related contributions risked dispersing the organization’s interventions, with work on small arms control an example of such dispersion.

With the election of a new president in 2006, who
brought an important message of change in governance, UNDP realigned its cooperation programme, but there were no indications of restructuring ongoing projects to support the revised outcomes. UNDP dependency on external funding may have influenced its strategic choices and threatened the optimal alignment of its interventions to its internal capacities, though not necessarily to Benin’s needs.

A major weakness of UNDP’s contribution resides in the sustainability of results. Without the consolidation of results achieved by UNDP and more government effort to tackle institutional issues, benefits may not be maintained. This issue is exemplified by the HIV/AIDS project, funded by the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria. A year after UNDP withdrawal, national capacities to maintain results remained weak, particularly in the management of drug procurement. Results already seem to be in regression.

The UNDP strategy of concentrating much of its programme on pilot projects constitutes a serious sustainability challenge. Successful pilot projects that are not followed by capitalization and replication are not a sustainable use of resources. African countries are awash with small development initiatives left to populations that are incapable of sustaining activities after the end of external support. One adverse effect of such experiments is demoralizing the local population.

The analysis of the project planning process revealed a prevalence of an iterative approach. Project identification seemed to have been based more on ad hoc opportunities than on a systematic strategy. This suggests that results-based management was not integrated in the country office programme management toolbox. Recurrent problems included delays in annual work plan approval; delays in mobilizing counterpart government funds; weakness of the monitoring and evaluation mechanism; lack of indicators; and deficiency in communication. Streamlining management tools and the reporting system are key elements to increasing UNDP performance in transforming resources into useful development changes.

On the whole, UNDP’s strategic positioning allows it to play an appropriate role; its programmes are relevant, highly responsive and effective. Improving two factors, programme efficiency and results sustainability, would further bolster its capacity to support Benin in facing its development challenges.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

- UNDP should place priority on sectors and themes where its expertise is recognized, rather than on those where fund mobilization alone is more feasible.
- UNDP should strengthen linkages between strategic policy initiatives at the central level and operational interventions at local levels.
- The current strategy of concentrating much of the programme on pilot projects constitutes a threat to sustainability. UNDP should concentrate on expanding and networking its existing successful interventions by limiting short-term interventions to those that impact ongoing ventures. It should also invest in projects’ second phases, with clearly defined activities based on previous accomplishments and a transfer of ownership.
- UNDP project exit strategies should be planned to ensure that the partner can sustain key project components.
- UNDP should make full use of its strategic positioning in handling subjects in which it has a comparative advantage and is trusted as a neutral party, including in setting up a common strategic platform among donors, which will ease the donors’ pressure on public administration.
- UNDP should reinforce its knowledge management practices in order to systematically identify and reinvest in best practices in all its supported projects.
- UNDP should capitalize on non-project activities. Advocacy activities, even if conducted outside of projects, should be more focused on common government and UNDP strategic objectives and be results-oriented.
- UNDP should reinforce synergies available from existing expertise inside its own structure.
- UNDP should update the practical knowledge of results-based management, including risk management.
- UNDP should strengthen and be more proactive in its communication with partners.
- UNDP should develop alternative models of providing development assistance, such as public–private partnerships, especially in key sectors for Benin’s economic and human development.

**ABOUT THE ICPEs**

Independent country programme evaluations (ICPEs) are the backbone of the work of the Independent Evaluation Office. They capture evidence of UNDP’s contributions to development results and the effectiveness of strategies supporting national development. They enable continued improvement in UNDP programmes, contribute to strengthened national ownership and evaluation capacity, and underpin accountability to national stakeholders and UNDP’s Executive Board. To date, over 100 ICPEs have been conducted worldwide.

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