

# BENIN: WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT THROUGH ENERGY AND CAPACITY BUILDING

United Nations Development Programme  
United Nations Capital Development Fund

POVERTY REDUCTION AND MDG ACHIEVEMENT



BENIN



Photo by Adam Rogers/UNCDF

## Background

The Republic of Benin, located in West Africa, has a population of 8.25 million (2008 estimate) living in an area of 119,762 square kilometers. The country ranked 163rd of 182 countries in the Human Development Index (HDI 2009), and 33.3% of its population lived below the poverty line in 2007. While its GDP growth rate has increased from 2.7% in 2009 to 3.2% in 2010, its overall economic growth has been stagnant.

The country has made significant progress in some Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly in health and education. The maternal mortality rate was reduced from 418 deaths per 100,000 births in 2001 to 397 per 100,000 in 2007, and child mortality - by 15% since 2001. The prevalence of HIV/AIDS among pregnant women aged between 15 and 24 has also declined to 1.8% in 2008. Malaria remains the leading cause of morbidity among the most vulnerable groups in Benin (110 deaths per 1,000 inhabitants in 2006). While the net enrolment rate for primary education has significantly improved to 84.6% in 2008, regional and gender disparities still persist. Female participation in politics remains very low, with women making up only 7% of parliament. The proportion of women in wage employment in the non-agricultural sector was 24.3% in 2002.

Poverty is still highly prevalent and access to energy remains extremely limited, particularly in rural areas. While the proportion of the popula-

tion living below the poverty line is 34.1% in urban areas, it is as high as 61.5% in rural areas. Due to limited agricultural productivity and high food insecurity, up to 30.4% of children remains malnourished. Access to modern energy services remains a critical issue, and current trends are unlikely to encourage faster economic growth. Many infrastructure bottlenecks, such as the lack of roads and ports need to be addressed. Environmental pollution and limited access to sanitation facilities are causing health and environmental problems.

## MDG Localization and Local Development Programmes

With the support from development partners, a wide range of MDG localization and local development initiatives has been successfully implemented in Benin. UNDP and UNCDF have provided support for communal development and local initiatives in two of the most impoverished departments of the country: in seven municipalities of Borgou, where the poverty rate is 48.5%, and six municipalities in Alibori, one of the most food insecure areas of the country. These initiatives have placed particular focus on strengthening planning and stakeholder management capacities and promoting MDG-based infrastructure works. In both regions, a range of MDG investments was made such as the construction of new classrooms, maternal health centers and hydropower stations.

Furthermore, through the installation of multifunctional platforms (MFPs) in the Kalale, Segbana and Sinande municipalities of Borgou as well as in the department of Mono in the Lokossa municipality, the project has significantly improved local economic productivity freeing women's time to invest in education of their children. As a result, the project helped increase incomes of 31,638 individuals, many of whom were women, in the most disadvantaged areas of Borgou. In the communes of Alibori, this initiative led to the development of an inter-communal strategic plan targeting key MDG areas, such as food security, women's empowerment, the promotion of sustainable agriculture and building of public infrastructures.

In partnership with the Government, UNDP and UNFPA also provided support for income generation as well as advisory support on business, health and civic education for 821 women in the municipality of Parakou. Occupational and skills training, along with other activities, increased literacy levels of the beneficiary women and promoted awareness on women empowerment, child and maternal health, and education for girls. Training on agro-business has also promoted economic diversification in the area.

UNDP and UNFPA have also implemented several pilot initiatives on MDG relevant infrastructure development with successful results, such as a hydropower project which improved access to safe drinking water



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## THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENTS IN ACHIEVING THE MDGS:

Since 2002, Benin has engaged in a decentralization process to help strengthen local governments' involvement in national efforts to reduce poverty and achieve the MDGs in 77 communes and three cities. The Government's third generation Poverty Reduction Strategy (2010-2015) seeks to improve local governance, enhance access to basic services and spur local economic development. The effective functioning of democratically elected municipal councils (with two elections held in 2003 and 2008), the participatory elaboration of Communal Development Plans aligned with the PRS and the development of local resource mobilization strategies represent major areas of progress.

At the same time, the effective transfer of sectoral competencies to municipalities, especially in core MDG areas such as social infrastructure, management of natural resources, as well as economic development at large, needs to be a priority for the future. Moreover, the capacity of decentralized units of line ministries and communes needs to be built in order to ensure their ability to provide effective advisory guidance to communes.

through the rehabilitation and construction of 250 wells in Alkori, Atakora and Borgou. In addition, a rural renewable energy project through solar electrification was piloted in the municipality of Zogbodomey, providing energy for 308 households while simultaneously reducing energy costs by 25% and improving educational outcomes of children.

As part of the overall capacity building efforts towards MDG localization, UNDP also collaborated with SNV to support the integration of the MDGs into Communal Development Plans along with the development of the MDG monitoring systems. Newly formulated MDG localization initiatives include the Songhai Project, currently piloted in the region of Porto-Novo with an objective to spur agricultural productivity and sustainable agriculture through capacity building of small farmers.

## Opportunities for Scaling Up

Given the high poverty rate, lack of infrastructure and limited economic opportunities in rural areas in Benin, promotion of sustainable agriculture /rural development, access to energy and capacity development of local communities remain a priority. These needs are particularly relevant for women in light of the low rates of women's participation in politics and formal employment.

The MFP approach has already demonstrated significant results across Western Africa in generating small scale energy for lighting and other uses, spurring job creation and allowing women to invest their time and labor in other productive activities. Coupled with the occupational and skills training initiative, it has an enormous potential to improve women's livelihoods in Parakou and other municipalities by enabling them to generate income and operate small businesses.

Therefore, it is proposed to scale up an MFP initiative, together with the capacity training programme that was piloted in Parakou, to empower 1.3 million women throughout the country. In order to maximize impact and accelerate progress toward the MDGs, this initiative can also be implemented in conjunction with ongoing projects that focus on the development of agro-processing activities and environmental resources management.