

BENIN – WOMEN ARE A CORNERSTONE OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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THE BIRTH OF A DEMOCRACY

Once known as Dahomey, Benin is a West African country on the Gulf of Guinea bordering on Togo, Nigeria, Burkina Faso and Niger. Originally a French colony, Benin gained its independence in 1960. With a predominantly rural population, the country has almost 20 different ethnic groupings. Although its capital is in Porto Novo, Benin's economic centre is Cotonou.

In 1972, the military took power under Mathieu Kérékou and brought an end to many years of political instability. In a climate of political oppression, Kérékou put the country on the road to becoming a Marxist Leninist state. In 1990, student power and public demonstrations forced Kérékou to renounce his socialist program and agree to hold the country's first democratic elections. Kérékou is the first African head of state to peacefully abandon his power in favour of democracy, and he was re-elected president in 1996 and again in 2001. In 2006, Yayi Boni, an economist, was elected president with a strong majority. This opened the road to a re-launching of the decentralization process with the intent of giving more power to local and regional elected officials.



A CADD women's group

THE ROAD TO FINANCIAL AUTONOMY

CCODP has been actively involved in Benin since the early 1980s, and one of the four civil society organizations supported is CADD (Cercle d'autopromotion pour le développement durable) or Self-help Circle for Sustainable Development.

CADD was established in 2001, which makes it one of the more recent NGO's (non-governmental organizations) partnered with CCODP. CADD's primary mission is the promotion of financial autonomy among Beninese women. It addresses this objective with a system of micro-credit facilities providing low interest loans to individuals denied access to traditional banking institutions. As this type of micro-credit scheme is intended to serve the poorest people and to encourage local development, it is increasingly evident in many countries of the Global South. CADD is also engaged in promoting women's autonomy through training, literacy work, health insurance, etc.

A SUCCESSFUL MICRO-CREDIT FACILITY

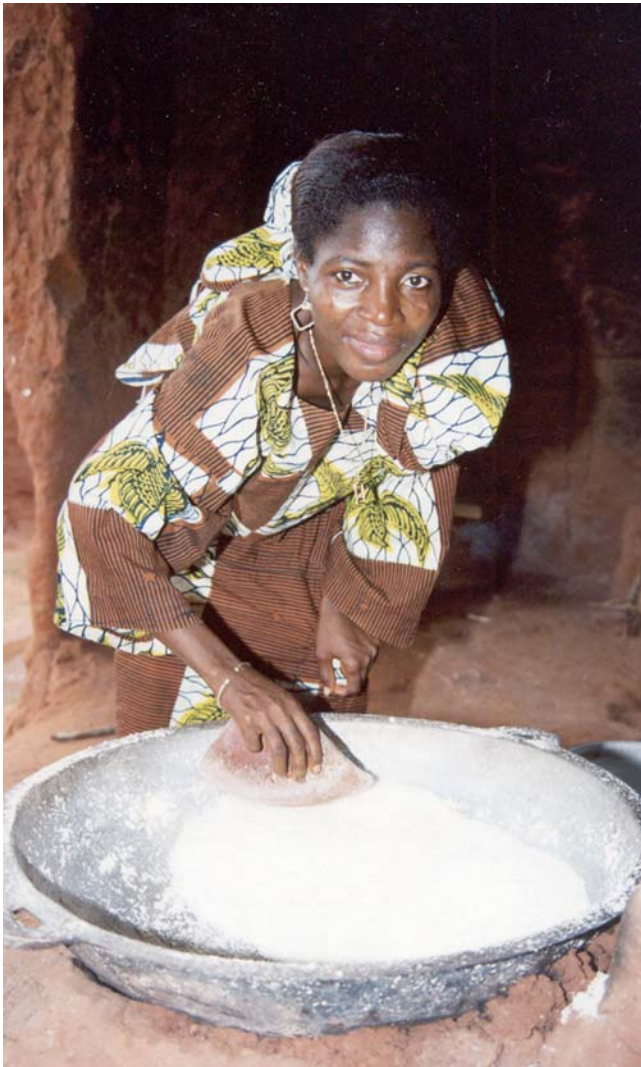
Although CADD's headquarters are in Cotonou, its outreach extends into the shantytowns and the rural areas. Over 3,000 women benefit directly from CADD's work but by adding their households and communities the total number grows to around 373,500 people.

IMPROVED ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL IMPACTS

While the economic impacts are most obvious, one can also see its social spin-offs:

- Improved general health of CADD members' families
- Increased education levels among children
- Increased respect for women and their role in the economy, particularly by their husbands
- Reduced episodes of domestic conflict

As the result of only seven years of work with CADD it is clear that, by giving women financial autonomy, their role within their society has also expanded. For example, CCODP can attest that women participating in CADD are beginning to develop a consciousness about their rights and responsibilities as citizens and to inform themselves about



Making flour from manioc

broader societal issues. However, their political participation still has a long way to go, particularly when weighed against their size as a demographic group.

ONWARD AND UPWARDS

With this in mind, CADD members want to increase their capacity to encourage women to participate more actively in democratic life. They are convinced that if women can influence local or national political decision-making, they will be able to improve their lives and that of their communities. This objective is to be achieved in various ways:

- Training in leadership, management and decision-making
- Running for political positions (city council, coordinating bodies, etc.)
- Animating radio broadcasts
- Participating in public conferences and debates

With the ongoing support of The Catholic Women's League of Canada, CCODP will continue to accompany and support CADD in this democratization process. At the same time, CADD

members' participation in the organizing of the 2004 and 2006 Benin Social Forums has already enabled women to make their positions known to other interveners. CADD is strongly committed to working with and mobilizing women. Its efforts and activities to date have clearly promoted the social role of women and counteract their economic exclusion.

IMPROVEMENT IN THE LIVES OF BENIN WOMEN

In 2006, local elected officials in Benin invited CADD union women to participate in discussions on the development plans for local communities in the lakeside areas and in Cotonou. This was in clear recognition of the dynamic contribution the women had made within their local communities.

For 40 years, CCODP has worked directly with organizations, which include a large number of women's groups, helping the poor and marginalized in the Global South. Thanks to the generosity of Canadians and especially the dynamic commitment and support of members of The Catholic Women's League of Canada, CCODP has provided over the years \$500 million to help fund 14,665 projects in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. It is presently active with over 200 partners in 33 countries.

SOME FACTS ABOUT BENIN

- Land area: 112,620 km²
- Population/population density: 8,439,000 inhabitants or 75 residents/km² (2005)
- Official language: French
- Languages spoken (in percentages): Fon 24.2, Yoruba 8, Bariba 7.9, Goun 5.5, Ayizo 3.9, Nago 3, Gen 2.1, Ditamari 2
- Agriculture accounts for 56 per cent of the country's exports
- 84 per cent of the country's urban population lives in shanty towns (2001)
- 74 per cent of women over the age of 15 are illiterate
- 62 per cent of girls never finish grade school (2004)
- 41 per cent of boys never finish grade school (2004)
- 31 per cent of the population lives on less than a dollar a day (2003)
- 14 per cent of the population is malnourished (2002)
- 161 of every 1,000 children die before the age of five; the corresponding figure for Canada is 6 of every 1,000 (2005) †

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