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## **Education for All: the situation in Benin**

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## EDUCATION FOR ALL: THE SITUATION IN BENIN

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Benin reformed its educational structure in 1975 by introducing what it called a “new school” system” to democratise education, add more practical subjects to the curriculum and adapt to local conditions.

The reforms were beneficial for several years<sup>1</sup> before fading between 1983 and 1985, partly because of national political and social crisis. Benin signed its first structural adjustment agreement with the Bretton Woods institutions in 1989 and the number of government employees was reduced.

These events had crucial effects on the quality and quantity of education on offer and significantly changed the attitude of parents and pupils to schooling.

Gross primary enrolment, for example, reached 62.2% in 1983 and then steadily fell to 49.7% in 1990. The rate for girls rose from 27.7% in 1975 to 43% in 1983 before dropping back to 35.7% in 1990. In 1988 and 1989, at the height of the social crisis, the primary school dropout rate reached a record 31%.

Neither the 1975 reform nor the changes set at the 1981 “new school” review conference enabled targets to be met. The hasty implementation of the reforms<sup>2</sup> and the country’s unprecedented economic crisis reduced the supply of education. Growing poverty also meant parents could ill afford to pay their share of school costs and very high unemployment among school-leavers reduced demand for education.

This paper looks at what progress has been made and why and discusses the performance of the education system between 1990 and 2000, educational planning and policy and prospects for EFA in Benin.

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<sup>1</sup> Primary school enrolment grew quickly, secondary education spread and university education sharply increased.

<sup>2</sup> Failure to introduce them in the right order, over-fast application, lack of proper follow-up and monitoring and not enough money and equipment.

## I. EDUCATIONAL PERFORMANCE BETWEEN 1990 AND 2000

Education in Benin covers nursery, primary and secondary levels, along with technical, professional and university education, training for the handicapped and informal education.

### *Nursery schools*

Children between 3 and 5 are an important group<sup>3</sup> because of the country's high fertility rate. They made up 12.5% (614,436) of the total population in 1992 and 11.3% (763,136) of it in 2002.<sup>4</sup>

Despite strong demand, still very little such education is available and the 2002 census put gross nursery school enrolment at 14.3% for boys and 12.9% for girls. The government earmarks less and less money for this level, for which data is very fragmentary. The private sector has been active since nursery schools were opened up to it in 1990 and is providing many more places. Enrolment in state nursery schools rose from 13,165 in 1993 to 16,647 in 1999, while private school pupils soared from 916 to 11,404.

The state no longer trains or hires supervisory staff at this level of school. However demand is growing because of rapid urbanisation, parents' increasing awareness of the importance of educating all their children and greater access of women to income-generating activity sometimes far from home.

### *Primary education*

Enrolment at this level (6-11) rose by an average 3.6% a year between 1992 and 2002, from a total of 892,752 children to 1,269,996.

At the same time, thanks to the private sector, the number of classrooms in all schools increased by 57.7% between 1992 and 2000, from 12,573 to 19,823. Enrolment rose by about 7.2% a year (twice as fast as that of primary schoolchildren), from 534,810 to 932,422. This produced a steadily rising gross enrolment rate (GER) from its lowest point of 49.7% in 1990 to 80% in 2000. The GER for girls grew faster (from 35.7% to 65.2%) than for boys, thus greatly narrowing the large gender gap.

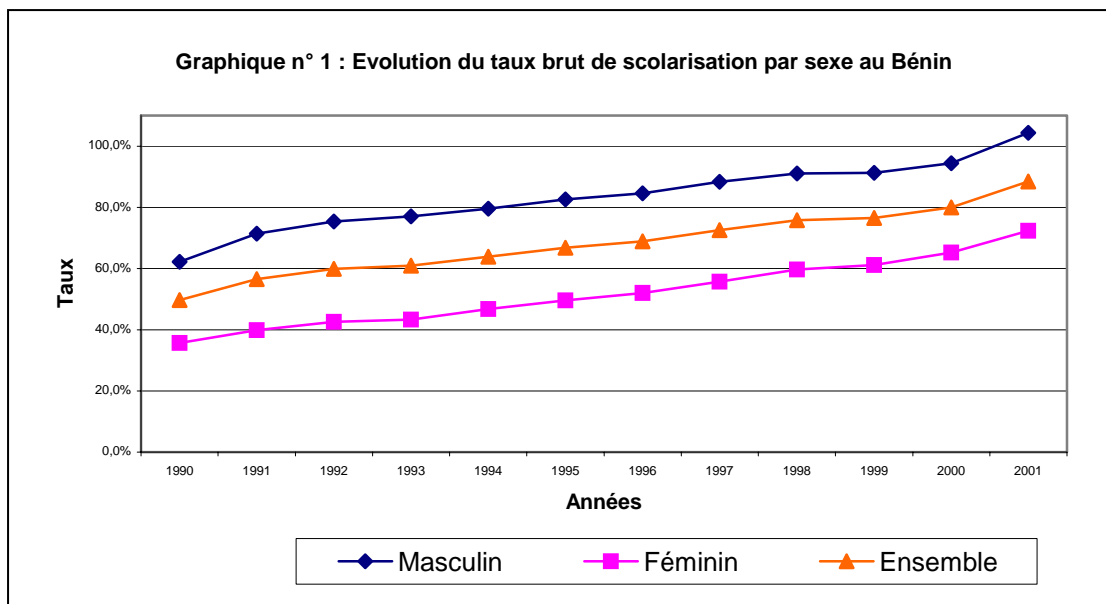
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<sup>3</sup> Despite falling over the past 20 years, the combined fertility rate was 5.6 children per woman in 2001.

<sup>4</sup> National censuses between 1992 and 2002.

(Fig. 1 – Gross enrolment by gender)

(rate)  
 (year)  
 (boys, girls, all)



Unfortunately, this big expansion in enrolment has not been matched by better quality of education. The pupil/teacher ratio is still rising – from 36.2 pupils per teacher in 1991 to 52.6 in 1998 – and the percentage of trained teachers is falling, from 91.9% in 1994 to 71.3% in 1998. Assessment of “basic standards”<sup>5</sup> in schools in 2000-01 showed that only 48.8% were built with solid materials and only 15.3% of classrooms had seats.

Based on 1998 rates of return, the retention rate for both sexes is estimated as 34% (28.1% for girls) and the completion rate as 26.5% (23.1% for girls).

This shows a high level of repeated years and wastage, with two-thirds of primary school children dropping out before the age of 10.

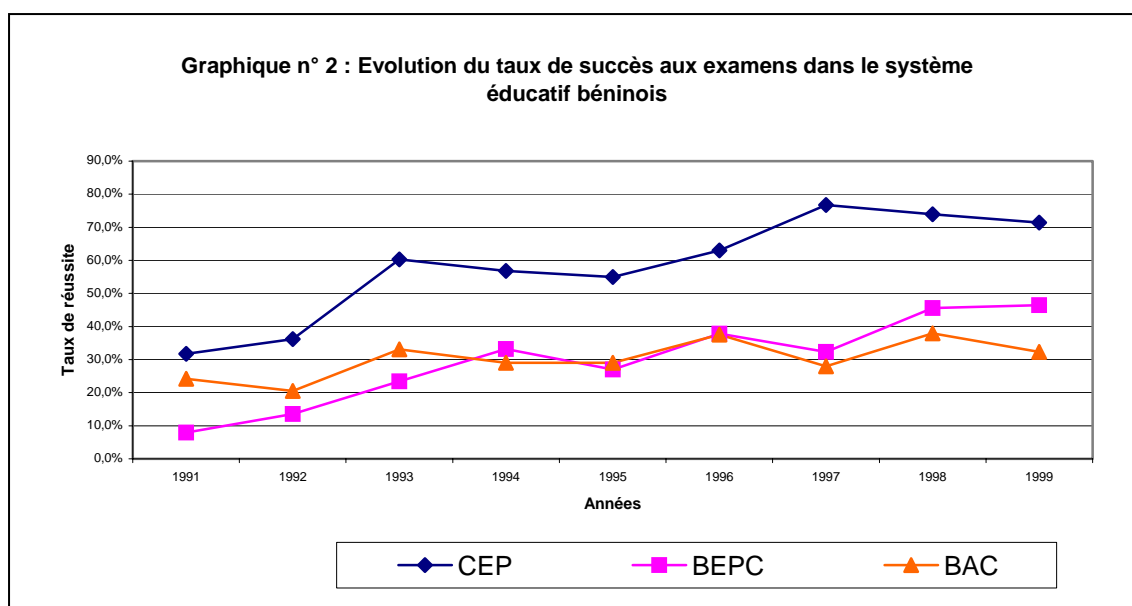
The small internal capacities, and especially pupil wastage, are related to lack of educational continuity due to many places having incomplete primary education facilities<sup>6</sup> as well as more and more untrained community teachers, over 40% of them with just an early primary education certificate (CEPE) or none at all.

Assessment in 2003 of the teaching part of state primary education reform alarmingly concluded that “Fewer than 10% of children can speak, read and write French at the levels expected in NPE (Nouveaux Programmes d’Etudes) materials in CI and CP. We noted also that students in CE1 encounter similar difficulties in French, where about 20 percent operate at required levels of mastery.”<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ministry of Primary and Secondary Education (2003): Rapport statistique de synthèse EQF-Bénin, Porto-Novo.

<sup>6</sup> In 1999, about 42% of schools did not offer all six years of primary education.

<sup>7</sup> USAID (2003): Evaluation of Benin’s basic education reform pedagogical component.



Fluctuation in the CEPE success rate shows how unsteady primary school performances are. In 2000, the rate was 64% but then fell to 49.6% in 2002. Repeated and lengthy strikes by state-sector primary teachers to win more pay and better professional and social conditions, partly accounted for these poor results, which may damage implementation of the reforms in the medium term.

### *General, technical and professional secondary education*

Statistics for this are frustrating and not as good as for primary education.

Available data shows most of the demand is from primary school (CEPE) graduates. Overall enrolment has shot up since 1992, from 15,010 with CEPE certificates to 49,808 in 2000.

In 1996-97, there were 40,637 pupils in the first year of junior secondary school, compared with 39,487 who gained a CEPE in 1996. In view of the number of technical and professional education places, this could be seen as an adequate situation, but places are not uniformly available in all parts of the country.

Secondary education enrolment at general, technical and professional level has grown very quickly over the past decade because of more places provided by the private sector.

**Table 1:** Enrolment by level of education, 1992-99

	1992-93	1993-94	1994-95	1995-96	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99
<b>General secondary</b>	86 466	105 008	114 751	128 256	146 135	169 016	188 035
□ Public	82 515	98 480	107 248	118 149	134 337	152 561	167 196
□ Private	3 951	6 648	7 503	10 107	11 798	16 465	20 839
<i>Junior</i>	69 539	86 373	93 895	105 980	122 240	141 722	158 944
□ Public	66 435	80 983	88 320	98 401	113 212	129 289	142 302
□ Private	3 104	5 390	5 575	7 579	9 028	12 443	16 642
<i>Senior</i>	16 930	18 755	20 956	22 276	23 895	27 294	29 091
□ Public	16 083	17 497	18 928	19 748	21 125	23 272	24 894
□ Private	847	1 258	1 928	2 528	2 770	4 022	4 197
<b>Technical and professional</b>	8 936	10 160	10 115	11 167	12 136	16 929	20 744
□ Public	4 015	4 870	4 28	5 054	5 565	6 013	6 737
□ Private	4 921	5 290	5 687	6 113	6 571	10 916	14 007

Source: World Bank, Africa (2002): Le système éducatif béninois

The private sector's contribution to general secondary education places rose from 4.6% in 1992-93 to 11.1% in 1998-99, and to technical and professional education from 55.1% to 67.5%. But private school places are concentrated in the big towns, so Cotonou and suburbs account for 78.4% of private school places.<sup>8</sup>

These trends show the private sector's ability to make up for the state's shortfall in places where there is a clear demand and also show parents' determination to invest more in educating their children.

But the quality of the places is below standard. What data there is shows coverage of the school timetable is weak in the state sector. It is improving with annual state subsidies to parents' associations, to 65% in 2000, 67% in 2001 and 79% en 2002.<sup>9</sup> Many teachers are only part-time and many schools lack qualified teachers in basic subjects. Between 1991 and 1999, the highest success rates for the BEPC and BAC exams were respectively 46.4% in 1999 and 38% in 1998.

### ***Higher education***

Demand for this has grown sharply over the past decade, due to the scarcity of jobs for high-school graduates and the need to put in more years of study to improve one's chances on the labour market. Lack of jobs even after university has led to students increasingly staying on by simply enrolling in another faculty. So the number of university students has doubled in less than 10 years, from 10,143 in 1992-93 to 21,073 in 1998-99.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> MENRS (1997): Données statistiques enseignement secondaire général, année scolaire 1996-1997, Cotonou.

<sup>9</sup> MEPS (2003): Les enseignements Primaire et Secondaire en marche, Cotonou, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> MEPS, MESRS, METFP (2003): Diagnostic Education pour tous, Rapport provisoire Cotonou

The supply of student places has not kept up with this strong demand despite the greater role of the private sector, which taught only 1.8% of university students in 1992-93 but 20.5% in 1998-99.

Infrastructure in the state sector is very inadequate, despite the opening of a second university in 2001. A 2001-2002 survey showed that the University of Abomey-Calavi had only 4,104 places for 20,175 students and that nearly 100 trainee teachers unqualified to provide higher education had been hired. Despite efforts to train teachers, there were still as many as 178 students per teacher in 1999 and 208 in 2000. Libraries and classroom and laboratory equipment were inadequate, partly due to low internal capacity in the sector.

### *Literacy*

Benin's population remains mostly illiterate. The gross literacy rate among the 15-24 age-group<sup>11</sup> was only 40.5% in 2002 with a gender parity of 0.54, with only 29.1% of girls literate compared with 54% of boys. In the 6+ age-group, overall gross literacy was 28.6% in 1992 and 37.7% in 2002.<sup>12</sup>

This meagre progress towards literacy is partly due to the decline in educational facilities in the late 1980s and insufficient literacy efforts over the past decade. The method of a mass literacy drive was abandoned in 1990 in favour of a quest for and provision of suitable responses to special educational needs and it was only in 2001 that Benin adopted an official national policy on literacy and adult education.

## **II. EDUCATIONAL POLICY AND PLANNING**

The quality of education on offer was hit by the economic and social crisis, which cut enrolment, reduced parental interest in education and sent adult literacy into decline at the end of the 1980s. This poor image of education was a focus of the 1990 national education conference and led to education being stressed in the new national constitution. The search for agreement, adoption of guidelines and regulations by the government and the major involvement of the private, community and religious sectors all helped to revive education in Benin.

Strong population growth (an average 3.2% a year between 1992 and 2002) boosted demand for education. The combined fertility rate was put at 5.6 children per woman in 2001,<sup>13</sup> making Benin a high-fertility African country with especially fast population growth.

The great efforts of civil society and government organisations to persuade parents to send all their children to school also contributed over the past decade to increased pressure on educational facilities. Suitable policies, plans and measures were drawn up and implemented in response.

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<sup>11</sup> 2002 national census.

<sup>12</sup> INSAE (2003): National census, 1992 and 2002.

<sup>13</sup> INSAE and ORC-MACRO, 2002, *Enquête Démographique et de Santé au Bénin 2001*, Macro Calverton.

### *General measures*

Articles 10-14 of the national constitution stipulate the duty of national and local authorities to educate children and say the private sector can contribute (see Box 1).

Later, in 1996, the government's declaration on population policy<sup>14</sup> spelled out priorities including progressively free-of-charge access to education, guaranteed equal opportunity for all, the fight against dropping out, especially by girls, the spread of education about population and family matters, reform of informal training and setting up facilities for discussion and cooperation between teachers and employers.

**Box 1:** Extract from the Beninese national constitution

*Article 10: Everyone has the right to education. The state has a duty to preserve and promote the nation's material and spiritual values and its cultural traditions.*

*Article 12: All communities that comprise the Beninese nation are free to use their own spoken and written languages and develop their own culture while respecting that of others.*

*The state shall encourage the growth of national languages to enhance communication.*

*Article 12: State and local authorities shall guarantee the education of children and create conditions to ensure this.*

*Article 13: The state shall provide education for young people in state schools. Primary education is compulsory; The state shall progressively provide education free of charge.*

*Article 14: Religious communities and institutions can also help to educate children. Private, secular or religious schools can operate with permission and supervision of the state, which may subsidise them in a manner defined by law.*

### *The national education conference*

Held in October 1990, this stated what was wrong with the education system and made recommendations. The problems described<sup>15</sup> included:

- Lack of a rigorous plan to implement reform.
- Lack of resources to ensure genuine democratisation of education.
- Decline in moral values and school discipline.
- Sidelineing of grassroots communities and especially parents of pupils.

<sup>14</sup> Ministry of Planning, Economic Restructuring and Employment Promotion (1996): Déclaration de Politique de Population de la République du Bénin, pp. 51-57.

<sup>15</sup> Ministry of Education (1991): Actes des Etats Généraux de l'Education, Cotonou, p. 150.

At the end of the conference, the government declared primary education was its first priority, followed by technical and professional education, and set itself six goals:

- ❑ Equal opportunity for all
- ❑ Better quality schools
- ❑ Rehabilitating educational structures
- ❑ Training for self-employment
- ❑ Regulation of pupil flows at all levels
- ❑ Controlling costs

These were to be implemented through reforms and sectoral plans over the years.

### ***Reform of primary education***

This began in 1993 with the target of increasing the system's internal and external efficiency and developing skills rather than simple accumulation of knowledge. The new curricula combined knowledge and about 20 subjects grouped into six fields – French, mathematics, social education, scientific and technological education, artistic education and physical education and sports.

Fifteen action plans were drawn up and then grouped into three headings – institutional reform, teaching and planning.<sup>16</sup>

The national conference on culture, youth and sports was also held in 1990 and endorsed the switch from a mass literacy drive to a quest for suitable responses to demands and other educational needs in literacy and adult education.

#### **Box 2: Strategic goals set by the World Education Forum, in Dakar**

- *Reform education to achieve national and regional development targets, especially social, cultural, economic and technological ones..*
- *Reform school curricula and improve the relevance, quality and methods of teaching by focusing on the needs of the pupils.*
- *Change the role of the state and the structures and functions of education systems to make it easier for decision-making partners to be actively involved in the lifelong learning.*
- *Strengthen leadership, management, research and information capacities in education.*
- *Strengthen cooperation with NGOs, civil society and development partners at community, national, regional and international level.*

<sup>16</sup> Dossou Sulpice (2002): La Direction de l'Enseignement Primaire, organisation, fonctionnement et perspectives In *Voyage d'études et d'échanges d'expériences au Togo des cadres du Ministère des Enseignements Primaire et Secondaire*, Porto-Novo.

Based on these guidelines, the government took various administrative and budgetary measures between 1990 and 2000, notably:

- Returning nationalised private schools to their owners.
- Implementing primary education reform and introducing into curricula education about population and family matters.
- Opening up education to the private sector.
- Encouraging parents to send all children to school, including the girls.
- State payment<sup>17</sup> of tuition fees for all children from the year 2000.
- Subsidising associations of parents of secondary school pupils so they could hire part-time teachers from 2000.

Opening up education to the private sector enabled the involvement of other parties such as community groups, national NGOs and religious organisations.

### *State funding of education*

Higher taxation in Benin during the 1990s (rising from 13% of income in 1992 to 17% in 1999) increased the government's ability to act. The state budget deficit narrowed despite the substantial rise in public expenditure (apart from debt service payments) from 16.7% of GDP in 1992 to 18.4% in 1998.

In spite of these favourable conditions, education spending, after reaching 21.5% of the national budget (except for debt payments) in 1993, steadily fell to 15.6% by 1999. But primary education's share of the education budget rose from 53% in 1993 to 60% in 1998. However, in real terms, expenditure per primary pupil remained about the same.<sup>18</sup> State funding of education represented only 3% of GDP. Some analysts think 6% of GDP is needed to meet the needs of the system.<sup>19</sup>

More state funding of education in Benin depends first on policy and then on better economic performances, better use of the money allotted and possibly more of it.

## **CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS FOR EFA IN BENIN**

After the 1990 national education conference, guideline documents were drafted for each educational sector. These concerned:

- Primary education reform.
- Secondary education reform.
- Reform of technical and professional training.
- The strategic development plan for higher education and scientific research (2002-07).

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<sup>17</sup> In 2002, the government spent 2.7 billion CFA francs on tuition fees in the state primary sectors and 2.1 billion CFA francs in subsidies to parents' associations.

<sup>18</sup> World Bank, Africa (2002): *Le système éducatif béninois, performance et espaces d'amélioration pour la politique éducative.*

<sup>19</sup> World Bank, Africa, op. cit. pp. 16-17

- The policy declaration on literacy and adult education.
- Exemption from customs duties on computer equipment to encourage use of computers in training and to promote new information and communication technology (NICT).

Establishment of an on-the-job professional training and apprenticeship development fund (FODEFCA) is boosting continuing education in the private and state sectors. Distance learning is also developing with the help of NTIC.

Over the last decade, Benin has also drawn up a document on long-term development prospects (Bénin 2025), which spells out the shared vision of education in 2025. So the country has some solid assets in its efforts to achieve the goals set at the 2000 Dakar World Education Forum if certain extra conditions are met.

The country's education system is in poor shape. Reforms are not implemented properly and the system's internal and external capacities have not improved much; However, basic technical discussions have been completed successfully.

Benin's education system is at a critical juncture because of the extent of demand, which is continually encouraged by those involved, and the problem of ensuring adequate supply. The arrival of decentralisation, giving elected mayors full responsibility for nursery and primary education, could boost the sector if local authorities realise the importance of nursery education.

The money spent on education is still far from enough and a major cause of the system's shortcomings. Political decisions are required to clarify the role of the state in funding primary education (the first priority) and properly organising the education system. Keeping government education spending in line with GDP growth would provide a steadier basis for government funding commitments.

The reliability and completeness of data needs to be ensured and statistical indices established to measure educational progress at different levels. Lack of money, equipment and personnel is probably partly responsible for this shortfall. But planning is a key area and should be a priority because the quality of reforms and readjustments in ongoing policies and programmes depend on it.

Lack of political commitment to education is clear in parliament, which has yet to pass a new education law. The 1975 "new school" law is still in effect even though the reforms that followed the 1990 national education conference no longer refer to it.

Without a clear political commitment, the education system will have a job meeting increasing and more complex demand for education.