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BUILDING RESPONSIBLE GOVERNMENT: BENIN'S NATIONAL EVALUATION SYSTEM, 2007-2015

SYNOPSIS

Beginning in 2007, Benin's reformist leaders sought to strengthen the quality of governance and public management by instituting a system for evaluating public policies. National policies and programs often had little impact on development outcomes, and existing systems for monitoring and evaluating government initiatives were largely donor driven and designed to fit donors' needs. As a result, the government struggled to define, prioritize, and coordinate policies within and across disparate sectors like agriculture, health, and education. With the support of newly elected president, Boni Yayi, Pascal Koupaki, Benin's minister for planning, development and evaluation, created a bureau for policy evaluation to analyze public policies across different ministries, assess their impacts, and recommend improvements. Given the prevalence of inefficiency and ineffectiveness, the idea of evaluation initially enjoyed little political support. However, a small team based in Koupaki's ministry, gradually built national evaluation capacities and increased internal demand for policy evaluation. By 2015, the bureau had become a permanent part of the administration, completed more than a dozen evaluation studies, and inspired the establishment of national evaluation mechanisms in West African neighbors Togo, Burkina Faso, and Mali.

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INTRODUCTION

"It can change. It must change. It will change." Thomas Boni Yayi's 2006 presidential campaign slogan captured the hopes of many Beninese who wanted more effective government and political leaders who served the country rather than

themselves.¹ Yayi, a political newcomer who had headed the Togo-based West African Development Bank for 12 years, campaigned on an independent platform that championed anti-corruption reform, support for small-and-medium enterprises, education, and youth employment. His vibrant campaign and absence of affiliation with

any political party caught the attention of the country's predominantly young electorate and led to a landslide victory on March 22 against long-time opposition figure Adrian Houngbedji.

The election marked the end of nearly three decades of rule by Mathieu Kérékou, who controlled Benin as a military-socialist dictator from 1972 to 1990 and returned to power in 1996 as elected president for an additional 10 years. Although the country was among the first in French-speaking Africa to democratize, Benin lagged behind many of its neighbors in terms of economic development. Structural reforms initiated in the early 1990s had stagnated under Kérékou's last years. More than 80% of the working-age population relied on informal work, and recently the price of cotton, the nation's main export, had plummeted.²

Many observers both inside and outside Benin pointed to policy failures, poor financial planning, and corruption within government—issues that gained credence during Kérékou's second term—as major causes of Benin's failure to achieve growth and improve living standards for its people. Donors that had rallied to support the young democracy in 1990s became increasingly concerned about the lack of government action and the mismanagement of aid money.

When he took office in April 2006, Yayi immediately appointed 22 ministers, many of them technocrats and bankers rather than politicians. He turned to Pascal Koupaki, a former director of the Central Bank of West African States in Dakar, to be minister of finance, economy, and development. Together they launched a series of reforms designed to address issues of accountability and governance. Yayi signed into law an official code of conduct for government employees. Koupaki launched financial audits of all the ministries and 60 state-owned enterprises, and prosecutors eventually brought charges against several high-ranking officials for misuse of public resources.

Aware that public investment often failed to translate into the anticipated development outcomes, Yayi sought to improve policy choices

and target government interventions more effectively. In many countries, a cabinet secretariat or a presidential policy unit facilitated consultation and coordination across government, ensured that policies were well-designed and included impact assessments and action plans, monitored implementation, and reported progress to the cabinet, called the Council of Ministers. But no such system existed in Benin's administration.

In June 2007, Yayi reshuffled his cabinet and appointed Koupaki minister of state in charge of planning, development and *evaluation of public action*. In this role, Koupaki oversaw economic policy and planning, and controlled most development assistance flowing into Benin. He coordinated a complex portfolio of development projects across 20 ministries. By explicitly including the evaluation function in the ministerial title, Yayi also gave Koupaki the authority to assess the implementation of policies across all sectors.

"For the first time, the government decided that the minister of state charged with development would also be responsible for public policy evaluation," said Martin Gbedey, one of Koupaki's economic advisors. "The objectives were to reinforce the system of accountability and to ensure the relevance and effectiveness of national policies."

In late 2007, as Koupaki considered how to set up a framework for policy evaluation in Benin, he turned to his chief of staff, Antonin Dossou, and a technical advisor, Aristide Djidjoho. Like Koupaki, both men were seconded from the Central Bank of West African States. The bank served eight West African countries that shared a common currency and comprised the West African Economic and Monetary Union. Dossou had been the bank's director for research and statistics for the past three years, and Djidjoho had been an assistant director for financial control. In August 2007, Koupaki asked the two men to research and propose the ways the ministry ought to approach the task.

"It was an extraordinary challenge," Dossou recalled. "We had to conceive this new function

and find ways to realize and institutionalize the notion of public policy evaluation.”

THE CHALLENGE

“We had problems at three levels,” said Eric Vickey, a long-time economic advisor in the Ministry for Development and Planning.

First, Benin’s government was not efficiently programming the use of resources, especially the resources provided by external partners. Second, the government was not prioritizing. Policymakers tried to incorporate every proposal with little attempt to identify and focus on those that were most important for the country’s development. Third, without external pressure, the public sector made little progress on the implementation of development projects.

“We have projects that have been running for 30 years that were viewed as short-term projects,” said Vickey. “If you have a five-year plan that takes you 20 years to implement, it’s absurd.”

Evaluation had the potential to address these problems of efficiency, prioritization, and implementation. “Evaluation helps you to understand change, both anticipated and unanticipated, and plan for what happens next,” said Dossou, who later became minister for evaluation. “It does this by establishing why the level of performance is being achieved, what difference is being made, what has been learned, and what to do next in the implementation of a policy or program.”

Effective policy evaluation required the systematic collection and analysis of evidence on programs, projects, functions, and organization in order to assess the relevance to stated objectives, the quality of implementation, and the level of impact. Dossou and Djidjoho saw unique challenges in evaluating Benin’s policies.

First, despite the president’s commitment to bolstering decision making and follow-up on government programs, support within the government was weak. Not surprisingly, many ministers, as well as their staff, saw little personal benefit in evaluating the implementation of their own policies. Evaluations were viewed as a threat,

given the prevalence of inefficiency and ineffectiveness in a government where the relationship between employment and job performance was tenuous and appointments to the civil service were largely a function of personal ties or patronage and.³ For similar reasons, evaluations had little support among regional and local government officials.

“The demand for evaluation was largely external,” said David Houinsa, an evaluation specialist and former planning ministry official who advised on the creation of the public policy evaluation unit in Benin. “Up until that point, the government had little experience in evaluation. The technical and financial partners commissioned expensive external evaluations of their projects.” Private firms conducted most of these studies, such as a 2005 evaluation of primary education reform.⁴

Because of past reliance on donor-funded evaluations carried out by international consultants, Benin’s government had little capacity to conduct its own. Aside from 20 or so highly specialized staff at the Observatory of Social Change, a semi-autonomous agency that monitored poverty, and the National Statistical Institute, few public servants had the necessary knowledge or the mandate to evaluate public policy. Each ministry had a handful of personnel in its programming and planning directorate who tracked project results, but skill levels were often rudimentary.

Dossou and Djidjoho also faced a communication and cooperation problem as they met with ministers and staff within ministries to talk about policy evaluation. In order to evaluate public policies they needed data and empirical evidence from ministries. But, equating evaluation with audit and control, public servants were reluctant to share information about the implementation of their programs and projects. Ministers feared punishment for poor performance or mismanagement of funds and worried the evaluations could be used as a political tool to discredit viable programs and projects. “When we started people were afraid of me,” Dossou said. “I

had to explain to people that we were not police or public prosecutors.”

A silo mentality in the administration further complicated the problem. Ministries operated autonomously, and civil servants were embedded within hierarchical structures that prevented coordinated planning and information exchange across government. A formal letter or program report from a mid-level official in the health ministry could take weeks to reach a counterpart in the education ministry.

A results-based management framework that the government had rolled-out in 2003 had done little to improve performance. Under this framework the responsibility for monitoring results lay with the development ministry, while the finance ministry controlled budgeting. There was also little follow-through within and across ministries. Ministers were allowed to reallocate funds among their programs and did not always adhere to the approved spending plan. Due to delays in procurement and disbursement, in some years the national budget was only partially executed. In 2007, for example, only an estimated 35% of the national budget for programs and projects was spent as planned.^{5,6} At the same time, the government sometimes continued investment in projects that achieved little.

Outdated information and communications systems further aggravated the coordination and implementation challenges. Without reliable access to Internet or shared databases, it was technically difficult to share timely information on project and program performance, let alone the kind of real-time data that anchor the most effective monitoring systems. Employees had to use personal e-mails, exchange portable flash drives, or rely on couriers and the postal service to share data and documents.

Complicating the situation further, a coalition of major and minor political parties that had supported Yayi's candidature for the presidency began to fracture. In early 2008, the National Assembly voted down a series of his anti-corruption proposals.⁷ Although Yayi began to implement some new measures via executive

decree, without broader political support he could not create a new agency devoted to evaluation.

Additionally, the government faced hard budget constraints. Under a new strategy for growth and poverty reduction negotiated with the World Bank and IMF, the country had to invest in social sectors, industry and agriculture in order to jumpstart economic growth.⁸ Koupaki could allocate only a limited amount from his ministerial discretionary fund to support policy evaluation and under the circumstances Dossou and Djidjoho were unlikely to secure more money to expand activities.

FRAMING A RESPONSE

“We started from zero in 2007,” Dossou recalled, as he and Djidjoho confronted the question of how to structure a new evaluation unit in Koupaki's ministry. Koupaki wanted to create a small, nimble organization that was close to and accountable directly to him as minister, rather than a large directorate that might become buried in the government bureaucracy. Given the ministry's financial constraints, his only viable choice was the former.

Koupaki assigned Djidjoho with responsibility for leading the evaluation unit. While at the Central Bank of West African States, Djidjoho had analyzed and audited internal management to ensure that the bank was efficiently meeting its organizational goals. In considering how to set up the evaluation unit, Djidjoho started by scrutinizing the demands that would confront the new organization and the capacities that would be required to meet those demands. “I first thought about how to put in place the institutional framework for the evaluation of public action/policy,” he said. “We wanted to clarify the evaluation process and the role of all national stakeholders. We identified capacity gaps and assessed what was needed to put a functional public policy evaluation system in place in Benin.”

Together with Dossou, Djidjoho outlined the mission and objectives for an evaluation bureau attached to Koupaki's ministerial office and

presented their initial ideas at an internal strategy meeting.

To keep costs low, Dossou and Djidjoho turned to an existing labor pool—a group of young policy analysts who were already working in the minister’s office. Drawn by the opportunity to work at the highest levels of government and develop competencies and connections that would later be valuable even outside of the public sector, the analysts came from regional development banks and the private sector, and many were recent college graduates. The analysts were hired on a contractual basis outside of the civil service recruitment system.

“It was an opportunity and a rich experience to work at the highest level of our country’s government,” said Prosper Houssou, a policy analyst who joined the minister’s office after an internship at the Bank of Africa, a multinational banking conglomerate with offices across much of the continent, and later became a coordinator for the policy evaluation unit. “Minister Koupaki wanted to train a professional cohort devoted to public service and detached from the state administration and the administrative mindset,” Houssou said.

Under Dossou’s supervision and mentorship, the analysts were responsible for analyzing all the documents—reports, proposals, and draft bills—that passed through the minister’s office and assisted a group of more senior technical advisors who supported ministerial decision-making. Koupaki, nicknamed *Monsieur Rigueur* by the Beninese press for his rigor and energy, imposed tight deadlines and held the analysts to high standards.

Djidjoho and Dossou also decided to contract with independent research firms and external experts to conduct the formal policy evaluations. Djidjoho’s preliminary assessment showed that the staff in the minister’s office lacked the expertise needed to conduct such complex evaluations. Furthermore, independent firms also had greater credibility in a period of high political tension and in an administration that was accustomed to relying on external guidance. The principle of

“*faire-faire*,” or contracted work, “was chosen in order to make sure the evaluation results would be credible and also to have national experts examine the implementation of public policies. The model allowed for broad stakeholder participation and also ensured that the findings from the evaluation reports would be impartial,” said Houssou.

Djidjoho also realized that the new evaluation unit could capitalize on the existing results-based-management system that collected information on project performance and results from each ministry. In each ministry, the programming and planning directorate had a handful of staff that tracked performance and could collaborate with the new program to strengthen the unit’s influence.

Because neither Dossou nor Djidjoho were experts in public policy evaluation, they began to discuss the idea with external partners. For a decade, aid donors had been calling for more coherent national policies and more efficient policy implementation. Donors were immediately interested in supporting Benin’s efforts to evaluate national policies and to better institutionalize evaluation in the administration. “We came up with the idea of evaluating public policies and the donors have accompanied us,” said Dossou.

With the backing of Yayi and Koupaki, it seemed like Benin was prepared to make a solid commitment to the type of policy evaluation that could improve policy design and implementation.

At the end of 2007 Djidjoho attended a regional workshop in Bamako, the capital of Mali, that explored core issues related to government policy evaluation and gave him a chance to talk with experts from UNICEF and the Canadian government, which sponsored the event. Djidjoho said he left the meeting with a new commitment to build ties not just with international organizations but also with other countries, such as South Africa and Uganda, that had created formal government institutions for policy planning and evaluation.

In 2008, the UNDP Evaluation Office agreed to provide technical assistance to build Benin’s national evaluation capacity, including financial

support for outreach and training activities. UNDP continued to support evaluation activities in Benin in subsequent years, starting with a diagnostic study in 2009 that highlighted potential paths for the further development of the new evaluation unit.

Djidjoho and Dossou also reviewed the experiences of other countries, including South Africa's Ministry of Performance Monitoring and Evaluation within the Office of the Presidency, and public-evaluation bodies in Canada and France.

Still, the two men knew that Benin needed a solution that addressed the country's unique challenges. "We did not review other countries experiences to decide that we needed a national system for evaluation," said Dossou. "But as the function evolved, we looked at the elements of what others were doing."

GETTING DOWN TO WORK

In early 2008, Koupaki created a small unit in his ministry that eventually became the Bureau for Evaluation of Public Policy (BEPP). As Dossou, Koupaki's chief of staff, and Djidjoho, his top advisor on evaluation, began to lay the foundations for the policy evaluation unit, they chose to adopt a gradual approach that recognized the need to start small, avoided raising the ire of political opponents, and suited to a limited budget.

Building the bureau

In July 2008, Djidjoho asked a young policy analyst in the minister's office, Mirianaud Oswald Agbadome, to help develop the operational structure and work plan for the ministry's new evaluation function. Agbadome, a recent finance graduate who had no previous experience in evaluation, had joined the minister's office as a trainee only six months before. In March he had moved up to the role of policy analyst when Djidjoho tapped him for the new assignment.

At the start, Djidjoho and Agbadome were the only two members of Koupaki's staff working on the evaluation unit. They started with little knowledge of how a national policy evaluation

system should function and built the bureau while learning.

"Like many others stumbled into evaluation by chance and learned by doing the work," said Agbadome, who later became an evaluator for the African Development Bank. "Djidjoho asked me to think about how we could really address the question of evaluation. He gave me the background documents, including a concept note on the modalities of implementing an evaluation system in Benin and the decree that defined the mission of the ministry and its functions."

Working from the concept note drafted by Djidjoho and Dossou, Agbadome researched the subject online, starting with documents on evaluation from the World Bank, the African Development Bank, UNDP, and OECD Development Assistance Committee. In October, he bolstered his knowledge by attending a three-week course in France, which provided an introduction to project and policy evaluation and the role of evaluation in public administration. The German Agency for International Cooperation (GIZ) covered the costs for Agbadome to participate in the course, the first of several international evaluation workshops that he and Djidjoho attended to build their policy evaluation knowledge and skills.

As Agbadome and Djidjoho learned about the process of policy evaluation, they also relied on the support of two UNDP technical advisors, François-Corneille Kèdowidé and David Houinsa. Kèdowidé, the evaluation advisor for UNDP in West and Central Africa made several visits to Benin in response to formal requests for support from Minister of State Koupaki to the UNDP Evaluation Office and the UNDP country office in Benin. Houinsa, who had a doctorate in sociology and had evaluated a number of UNDP projects, worked with the BEPP as a local consultant. Houinsa and Kèdowidé both provided critical technical assistance and evaluation expertise during the BEPP's start-up phase.

With input from these two experts, Djidjoho began to map out the institutional framework for the BEPP. He wanted to understand what other

government agencies or offices should be involved in order for the unit to successfully evaluate policies in areas like agriculture or health. Djidjoho also defined the BEPP's role in the evaluation process. Although outside firms and consultants would carry out the studies, the BEPP's job was to define the policy questions, oversee the consultants, and ensure that the results of the evaluations reached policymakers. The BEPP would develop the terms of reference, communicate with ministers and their staff, review the reports from consultants, and present findings to the government.

Djidjoho also began to develop a plan of work that would fit the program's budget. Initially, BEPP's activities were limited to training and the recruitment of an independent research firm to evaluate national agricultural policies over the course of the next year. As the team began to search for qualified research firms, they emphasized the need to support Beninese companies and build national evaluation capacities. The BEPP began with a budget of 50 million West African francs (roughly \$100,000 at the official exchange rate) for the 2008 financial year, but that budget grew to CFA 120 million by 2010, as the bureau's activities expanded. The budget allowed the BEPP to contract two to three national policy evaluations per year and run a limited number of training workshops for government staff. Any additional activities such as conferences or outreach often required additional funding from the government and donors.

Launching the first policy evaluation

The new bureau's first major undertaking came in 2009, when Djidjoho launched a sweeping evaluation of Benin's agricultural policies. Just before Yayi entered office, the production of cotton, the country's chief export, had plummeted to half the previous year's level due a decline in the global market price and government interventions that favored special interest groups.⁹ Yayi's government aimed not only to reorganize the cotton industry but also to revitalize the entire

agricultural sector, diversify crop production, and increase national food self-sufficiency.

The evaluation of agricultural sector policies was a learning experience for the new bureau. "We knew that the agricultural sector had many problems," said Agbadome. "But we did not understand why the sector was failing. The agriculture ministry had many policy documents but there was no comprehensive statement of what the national agricultural policy was and was supposed to be."

In November 2008, Djidjoho and Agbadome, had written the terms of reference that spelled out the requirements for the consultants that would be hired to perform the evaluation—aims and scope, data collection, the form of the analysis, and required reports. However, due to the government's complex procurement and contracting process, the two men didn't get a chance to read the completed evaluation until a year later.

"At the time we were a bit idealistic," said Agbadome. "We thought we could conduct an evaluation of sectorial policy in three months."

The evaluation also highlighted the issue of internal communication. Initial progress on the evaluation was slow because of insufficient consultation at the outset between the BEPP and the agriculture ministry and policy experts on the terms of reference. The BEPP notified the agriculture ministry about the pending evaluation only when the newly contracted consultant was about to begin work.

Assogba Hodonou, an agronomist who at the time headed the programming and planning directorate at the 3,000-person agriculture ministry, said, "We were somewhat concerned because the initiative was external. But the big issue arose when we read the terms of reference. As they [the BEPP staff] were not sector specialists, the terms of reference were not appropriate [to the situation at the ministry]." A revised methodology, created with input from Hodonou and other agricultural specialists, and endorsed by the BEPP allowed the consultant to move ahead.

Designing a participatory process

As the evaluation of agricultural policy began, a new (and related) lesson emerged: the importance of effective, sometimes personal, communication to clarify concerns and eliminate roadblocks based on misunderstandings. Despite Hodonou's support of the evaluation, many agriculture ministry personnel remained reluctant to provide necessary information and data. Many did not understand the purpose of the process, and some feared that it was a tool for enforcing accountability. Initially, managers and technical staff often ignored the letters and questionnaires sent out by the consultant.

"It required a lot of calling and one-on-one conversations even to get officials in the agriculture ministry to agree to speak with the consultant and respond to questionnaires," Djidjoho recalled. "To move forward, the exercise had to be as participatory as possible. For the result to be accepted, it had to be participatory."

Cultivating buy-in from line ministries required transparency and inclusiveness. Working with Dossou and other government allies, Djidjoho set up a system where each evaluation was guided by a temporary steering committee that included not only bureau staff but representatives from all the agencies and groups affected by the review: the ministry whose policies were being evaluated, relevant civil society groups, and international donors. Three other directorates from Koupaki's development ministry, collectively responsible for performance monitoring (the directorates of Policy Development, Policy and Program Monitoring, and Investment Financing and Development), participated in the steering committees for all evaluations, regardless of the sector under review.

The job of the steering committees was to define the specific policy questions to address in its particular study, comment and approve the terms of reference, select the firm to carry out the study, review the preliminary findings and draft reports, and vet the final report and recommendations before submission to the president and cabinet.

Djidjoho applied the new procedure in all subsequent policy evaluations by the bureau.

Houssou said the average time for each policy evaluation remained at nearly a year, but he stressed that ministries were more willing to participate and to pay attention to the evaluation results.

"The value of the exercise was to tell us what works and what doesn't work from an external perspective," said Hodonou, who in 2015 was the secretary-general of the agriculture ministry. "It raised our awareness and allowed us to better organize the reforms that we already knew we had to do. That is the real value-added."

Communications and capacity building

Starting in 2010, the government sought to put the bureau on a stronger institutional footing, raise its profile, and build the capacity for policy evaluation throughout the ministries.

The year before, the UNDP had funded a diagnostic study to assess national evaluation capacities and propose ways to strengthen them. "The diagnostic clearly revealed that national evaluation capacity was weak," said Djidjoho. The study highlighted the limited national expertise and resources. At the time few ministries or agencies had resources devoted to evaluation and the budget of the BEPP at that time was small compared to the number of policy areas that needed to be evaluated. "In terms of the legal and institutional basis [for evaluation], there was nothing but the decree creating the ministry. That was it," added Djidjoho.

The study concluded that the government should develop a clear institutional framework and adopt a national evaluation policy, and that the bureau should publicize the role of evaluation in the policy process by establishing "national evaluation days."

Regardless of the bureau's future organization, Djidjoho recognized the need to build their group's credibility within the government and establish the value of policy evaluation in the minds of ministers and civil servants at all levels.

He and Agbadome began to meet with planning and monitoring staff across all the ministries. Often these meetings were with small groups to explain the role of the bureau and how it functioned. In conversations with ministries' planning directors, they highlighted the ways in which evaluations would enable improved policies and better results.

“Our goal with these meetings was to explain the need for policy evaluations,” Agbadome said. “And we knew we had to mobilize people around their interests. If they knew how evaluation could be useful to them, then they would be ready to work with us.”

Djidjoho also sought to leverage the existing project monitoring staff within the program and planning directorates of Benin's 26 ministries to expand national capacity in policy evaluation. He asked ministry planning directors to select two staff members who could act as liaisons, called “focal points,” for the bureau. In an administration where official letters between ministries often took weeks, having a network of familiar contacts across the ministries greatly simplified the bureau's coordination efforts and provided internal advocates for policy evaluation.

Creating the network of focal points “multiplied the power” of the bureau, Djidjoho said. Instead of just two staff members in the Ministry for Development, he could count on 54 affiliated personnel across the entire government.

Fostering this network required additional resources that exceeded Koupaki's discretionary budget for the BEPP. With Dossou's approval to seek outside funding, Djidjoho turned to external partners, notably UNDP and UNICEF. Agbadome and UNDP's Kèdowidé designed the initial training and outreach materials for all the sectorial focal points.

The bureau's staff also organized workshops to harmonize perspectives and build skills. “The aim of the workshops was to bring the focal points to the same level as us,” said Houssou, who led the workshops. “We wanted to give the focal points the basic tools required to conduct a process evaluation. It was important to harmonize

evaluative practices across ministries and also to improve people's technical skills.”

In 2011, the bureau expanded the workshops to include local government staff responsible for monitoring and evaluating programs across all of Benin's 67 communes, or municipalities. UNDP and UNICEF helped finance these initiatives.

UNDP and the French Development Agency also supported Benin's first National Evaluation Days in June 2010. Organized by the BEPP, the three-day conference brought together government ministers, ministerial focal points, legislators, bureau staff, and international experts. Repeated in 2012 and 2014, the National Evaluation Days provided an opportunity for focal points to deepen their understanding of the evaluation concepts and process. In the later years, the Danish aid agency, DANIDA, and Germany's GIZ also helped sponsor the evaluation days. The main benefit of the external partners' contribution to the evaluation days was “to raise the profile of the BEPP and to expand the use and dissemination of the evaluation reports,” said Catherine Bonnaud, the Agency's country director in Benin in 2015. In later years, the Danish aid agency, DANIDA, and Germany's GIZ also supported the evaluation days.

The bureau also leveraged links with international partners such as the International Initiative for Impact Evaluation (3IE) and the World Bank coordinated Regional Centers for Learning on Evaluation and Results (CLEAR) to arrange for Beninese civil servants to travel abroad for short-term training courses and evaluation conferences. These activities helped to diffuse technical knowledge and contributed to the professionalization of the staff that worked on monitoring and evaluation throughout the administration.

As ministers began to comprehend how evaluations could be tools to highlight problems and inefficiencies, and to identify policy solutions they began to regard the bureau as an ally rather than a threat. Ministers began to approach Dossou and Djidjoho to request evaluations not only for policies that were already being implemented but

also for newly proposed sectorial policies and programs.

Institutionalizing evaluations

Following Yayi's reelection as president in March 2011, he appointed Koupaki to the office of prime minister, a newly created post designed to improve coordination among ministers and oversee the daily business of running government. The nomination of Koupaki, a native of southern Benin, was also seen as a means of cultivating political support in a region that had historically been loyal to the opposition. For Koupaki, the change in title was not just a confirmation of his leadership role in the government but also an opportunity to strengthen policy coordination mechanisms and the use of evaluation by the administration.

During the next two years, while the bureau's functions remained largely unchanged, the government took steps to formalize the role of evaluation in policymaking. First, the government adopted a National Evaluation Policy, as recommended by the UNDP's 2010 diagnostic report. Second, the government transformed the bureau into a permanent directorate. And, third, the government created an advisory body, the National Evaluation Council, to oversee national policy evaluations.

Agbadome and Djidjoho, with input from Prime Minister Koupaki and the Chief of Staff Antonin Dossou, drafted the national policy based on the evaluation procedures they had developed for the bureau. UNDP consultant, David Houinsa, reviewed the document. Although the policy was drafted by late 2011, it was another year before the cabinet adopted a final version. The policy clarified the government's vision of evaluation as a reform tool. "The adoption of a policy document by the government provided a comprehensive framework for conducting evaluations national policies and helped to legitimize our role in the administration," Djidjoho said.

The policy applied to the entire public sector at both central and local levels and provided a minimum guarantee of budget and organizational

support for policy evaluation. The document defined the overall framework for planning and carrying out evaluations, and for applying the results. In addition, the policy required each ministry to periodically evaluate its overall policies and to cooperate and coordinate with the BEPP in carrying out evaluations. Without specifying an amount, the policy also stipulated direct budget support for the bureau and for training activities that would enhance evaluation capacities within the administration.

The policy opened the door to the institutionalization of policy evaluation in Benin's administration. In 2013, the government made the evaluation bureau a directorate, a permanent part of the government, with the mission of evaluating national policies. Djidjoho became Director-General of the new office and the directorate acquired a small staff of permanent civil servants.

In August of the same year, Koupaki resigned from his ministerial post. In the ensuing cabinet reshuffle, President Yayi moved the Directorate for Evaluation of Public Policy to a newly created Ministry for the Evaluation of Public Policy, Good Governance and Social Dialogue, and appointed Antonin Dossou, Koupaki's former chief of staff, to lead it.

The new ministry was among the smallest in terms of staff size, and without the financial clout of the development ministry behind it, there was some question about whether it could continue to play an active role in national policy discussions. "We had to really assert ourselves to retain the same importance and keep up the same results without the same influence," said Agbadome, who was by then appointed Director of Evaluation Studies. "Even when the reshuffling could have had negative impacts, we turned them into a positive discourse. ... We defended the fact that in the new title of the ministry, evaluation was a central function. Evaluation was here to stay."

The National Evaluation Policy also called for the creation of a National Evaluation Council, to review and validate evaluation methodologies, findings, and reports before submission to the cabinet. Council members typically had decades of

high-level experience in public affairs and public management. The Chief of Staff of the Minister of Evaluation and Djidjoho, the General-Director of Evaluation, held ex-officio seats, and the remaining eight council members included representatives of other ministries, the president's office, academia, and civil society. The Directorate for Evaluation of Public Policy proposed candidates for council membership, and the cabinet had final approval.

The council became active in 2014. Meeting twice a year for one to two days, the group reviewed the methodology to be used for proposed policy evaluations, provided detailed input on draft evaluation reports, and commented on the results of completed studies. The council's validation helped to boost the credibility of the evaluations it reviewed. The directorate served as secretariat for the council, convened the meetings, and distributed proposals and reports at least two weeks before the meeting dates.

Jean-Baptiste Elias, president of the National Association for the Fight Against Corruption, a union of civil society groups fighting for transparency and accountability in government, and former president of the national anti-corruption observatory, emphasized the diverse perspectives of the council members. The sole civil society representative on the council, Elias said that the key advantage of the council was that it provided a forum for open discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of national policies. "We deliberated the evaluation reports and findings," he said. "We spotted the gaps and the inconsistencies in both the methodology and the substance of the findings. If a report overlooked instances of corruption, we discussed the issues openly."

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Despite presidential support for evaluation and the more stable status as the Directorate for Public Policy Evaluation, ministries were still slow to act on the results and the recommendations of evaluation reports. Although such conclusions were presented and discussed with the president at cabinet meetings, Benin's system had no

mechanism to monitor whether ministries implemented recommended policy changes. "We reported to the president on the implementation of sectorial policy and formulated recommendations on how to improve the situation," Dossou said. "We gave recommendations, not instructions."

Even though some officials may have been willing to make changes, the absence of a reliable communication system within and between ministries was problematic. Part of the problem was that reports often just sat on shelves gathering dust and never found their way to the desks of those who needed them. "The system of dissemination [of evaluation reports] has not worked well," said Agbadome. "There is no practice of collecting all the reports in one place in a ministry where everyone can have access. Too often whoever receives the report just sits on it."

In order to ensure that evaluation reports actually reached key people, the Directorate for Evaluation of Public Policy (formerly the evaluation bureau) started to send copies of the evaluation reports directly to all senior civil servants in the sector under review, as well as to civil society groups and external partners. Additionally, in 2015, the directorate, then under the leadership of Abdoulaye Gounou, developed a database tool to track the implementation of evaluation recommendations. Gounou held a series of meetings with the staff of the program and planning directorates in each ministry to review the measures taken to implement the recommendations stemming from their evaluations. But in the absence of sanctions for ministers or senior managers that failed to take action, the review process still had no teeth.

Government instability in Benin contributed to the lack of follow-through by ministries on policy recommendations. The frequent turnover of ministers and shuffling of ministerial portfolios under Yayi's administration required top officials to be fast learners, and it was difficult for them to get all the information they needed. In June 2015, Yayi, appointed a new prime minister, and the Ministry for the Evaluation of Public Policy, Good Governance and Social Dialogue, was dissolved

and the Directorate for Evaluation placed once again under the new prime minister's authority.

Gounou, who was appointed director-general for public policy evaluation in 2015, pointed to the difficulties the turbulence at the top raised for the administration. "We don't even have time to brief a new minister properly for the job before a new one take his place," he said.

Moreover, in an environment of high turnover in ministerial posts, permanent civil servants had little incentive to implement changes proposed by their bosses.

ASSESSING RESULTS

By the end of 2015, Benin's Directorate for Evaluation of Public Policy (originally the Bureau for Evaluation of Public Policy) had conducted more than a dozen public policy evaluations in agriculture, public finance, education, health, and energy. Some of these evaluations—notably in agriculture, decentralization, and water management—influenced the design of new policies and the restructuring of ministries. The evaluation bureau itself had grown from a small, ad hoc structure attached to a minister's office into a permanent directorate within the administration. With political support but limited funds, the bureau had trained a network of staff throughout the government and increased the country's overall capacity to evaluate national policies.

The evaluations themselves focused on the performance and implementation of overall sectoral policies to determine relevance, efficiency, and achievement of objectives. Benin's first policy evaluation on agriculture "was the best in terms of results" despite being the most difficult to carry out, Djidjoho said. The findings of the 2009 evaluation showed that the ministry was not on track to achieve the national goals of increased cotton production and food self-sufficiency. The evaluation launched two further reforms at the Ministry for Agriculture, a revision of the Strategic Plan for Agricultural Sector Recovery, and a major restructuring of ministry operations. Most of the results highlighted in the 2009 study "were things that we already knew and they were problems that

we had identified, because we had done studies ourselves," said Hodonou, of the agriculture ministry. "But, the study allowed us to reconsider the organizational structure and enter into a series of reforms which continue today."

By 2015, evaluations had produced change in other sectors as well. The evaluation of national policies led to the creation of a monitoring system to track policy implementation of decentralization and devolution, for example. And an evaluation of water resource management accelerated the passage of a law governing water use.

The bureau succeeded in building support for evaluation throughout the government. The bureau's outreach and communications efforts increased internal demand for evaluations and increased awareness of the value of evaluation studies for improving the design of public policies.

"In 2015, the ministry of the environment asked the [Directorate for Public Policy Evaluation] —insisted—that they conduct an evaluation of their policies. They even indicated that they were ready and willing to provide the funds for the evaluation," said Martin Gbedey, the prime minister's cabinet director. "Evaluation has become institutionalized in Benin. It is now an accepted part of the government."

At an operational level, the directorate boosted national evaluation capacity significantly by training and establishing working relationships with about 400 government employees at the ministry and local levels. In 2015 the directorate had a budget of almost FCFA 300 million (roughly USD 500,000) and a team of almost a dozen permanent and contractual employees. The directorate had sustained the cooperation and regional exchange of knowledge with the national policy evaluation organizations in South Africa and Uganda, which had begun in 2012.

While this represented progress, critics argued that much work remained to be done. The staff in all the ministerial directorates for programming and planning, as well as staff in municipal governments, all needed more extensive training on evaluation if the concept was to take root. Internal resource constraints, made it difficult to

sufficiently boost skill-levels in the administration and the ministry still relied on foreign assistance to fully cover the costs of staff training and capacity-building programs.

Critics also said the evaluation reports should be disseminated more widely and published on the directorate’s website. As of September 2015, no policy evaluations were accessible on the site.¹⁰

The bureau also made solid progress toward ensuring the sustainability of the evaluation process in Benin’s government. The passage of the national evaluation policy and the creation of the national evaluation council made it more difficult for future governments to suppress the use of evaluation in governance. Despite these positive steps, many felt that more could be done to increase the demand for evaluation and to require ministries to take account of evaluation results.

“Benin still needs a legal framework for evaluation,” said Damase Sossou, the head of evaluation studies for the directorate. “We need the National Assembly to pass a law mandating a national evaluation system that requires ministries to participate in evaluations and apply the results in implementing policies.”

In 2015, progress on integration of the policy evaluation function with Benin’s existing results-based management system remained limited. The two systems—performance monitoring and policy evaluation—operated separately. According to Eric Vickey, an economic advisor at the Ministry for Development and Planning, the policy evaluation system had little direct impact on the programming and budgeting process.

REFLECTIONS

Looking back on the 2007-08 creation of the Bureau for Public Policy Evaluation (BEPP), Martin Gbedey, who served as economic advisor to Minister Pascal Koupaki during the period, recalled, “At the time, it was the most appropriate format for the evaluation of public policy.” The creation of the BEPP was a step towards the development of a culture of evaluation and accountability in Benin’s administration.

As a small organization attached to a minister’s office, the bureau gave reformers the chance to launch the new function of evaluation and advocate for greater policy effectiveness without raising ire among other ministers and civil servants. “People were wary of the evaluators; people saw the evaluations as a vehicle for the government to denounce the way they performed jobs,” Gbedey said. In a political climate that was not friendly to reforms or to notions of accountability, the system of policy evaluation offered a gentler approach toward the contentious and potentially disruptive task of reviewing and adjusting the policies of sectoral ministries to better achieve national objectives.

The success of the BEPP can be attributed not just to the gradual, soft-footed approach, but also to the quality of leadership and management. Many cited the work of Koupaki, the minister for planning, development, and evaluation, who during his six years in office prioritized and exemplified issues of government accountability and effectiveness. His chief of staff, Antonin Dossou, and the evaluation bureau’s coordinator, Aristide Djidjoho, focused on building a successful evaluation system, and they understood the need to build a coalition of supporters both within Benin and internationally. UNDP and other external partners provided crucial financial support for basic activities and brought the office international attention.

The strength of that leadership, coupled with a strong commitment from an initially reformist president, underpinned Benin’s success and offer important guidelines for other countries that aim to institutionalize the role of evaluation in government policy administration.

As of 2015, Benin was one of just three countries in Africa, and the only Francophone country, with a formal national policy evaluation system; the others were Uganda and South Africa. Three other Francophone countries, Togo, Burkina Faso, and Mali, were in process of designing their own evaluation systems, inspired in part by the example of Benin. Reflecting on the use of policy evaluation in emerging economies,

Antonin Dossou, Benin’s minister for policy evaluation from 2013 to 2015, said, “The benefit of evaluating public policies is that it forces us to ask ourselves a fundamental question: Why don’t even well-conceived public policies achieve what we expected or have any results?”

In Benin, the policy evaluation bureau worked to answer this question, but effective follow-through by ministries on evaluation findings and recommendations remained a stumbling block in 2015.

“Evaluation has helped us identify the policy problems and implementation issues,” said David Houinsa, the UNDP consultant who conducted a 2010 diagnostic study of the country’s needs and challenges regarding policy evaluation. “However the quality of management in many ministries has

prevented the government from applying the results of the evaluations.”

Jules Yehouenou, a senior civil servant in the Ministry for Evaluation, reflected on his 18-year career in government and noted that Benin had been trying to improve government performance for more than a decade. “We have tried all the reforms and have all the systems in place, but now ministries need to execute and do the work based on the plans in place”

Looking at the example of South Africa, “We hope to grow,” said Damase Sossou, evaluation officer in the evaluation directorate. “The small hopes that we had at the start have been achieved. But the more we progress, the more we aspire to accomplish.”

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