



Beninese Civil Society Takes Charge

The Government of Benin procurement office policy emphasizes competitive bidding. However, special interests often fix bidding or tamper with contracts after they are awarded. A conflict regarding unfair award practices erupted when the Ministry of Environment, Housing, and City Planning recruited a contractor for a feasibility study to implement a development project in Djougou, a city located in northern Benin.

Following the solicitation and review process, the decision was made to award the contract to the most qualified candidate, a local firm Bureau d'Ingénierie et de Management (BIM). When presented with the selection committee report, the Minister challenged the decision on the grounds that the selection committee overlooked essential factors and should have selected his candidate, a company named SERAU SEM, in which he is a shareholder. Realizing that it could not meet all the requirements under the scrutiny of an active civil society, SERAU SEM decided to withdraw from the competition.

However, the Minister continued to challenge the decision and again decided to unilaterally award the contract to SERAU SEM, thereby circumventing the validation of the National Procurement Verification Commission which was created to stem corruption. The Commission, which includes a number of civil society watchdog organizations such as the National Front of Organizations against Corruption (FONAC), was created to ensure that procurement procedures are followed. FONAC had no choice but to take the problem to the public.

Non-governmental organization networks, organized by FONAC with financial assistance from USAID, bring complaints of corruption to the attention of the general public. Several of these complaints have involved high ranking public officials and are barometers of the level of corruption in the national government. Supporting anti-corruption efforts since 1996, USAID funded several non-governmental groups to undertake awareness campaigns, promote public debates on radio and TV, and encourage the media to probe corruption cases.

Further investigation by FONAC led to the publication of BIM's complaint. In response to FONAC's action, the Vice President of FONAC and the Minister of Environment were invited to a face-to-face nationwide TV debate. Each party justified its position, but the Minister failed to convince public opinion on the legality of his recommendation. The Managing Director of BIM reacted by challenging the Minister's justification in court. The contract for a feasibility study was awarded to BIM after validation of the National Procurement Verification Commission.

To stem corruption, the Government of Benin created a National Public Procurement Verification Commission, which includes civil society stakeholders such as the National Front of Organizations against Corruption.

Organizations such as FONAC and other citizen groups are more determined than ever to combat corruption. The debate demonstrated Benin's level of entrenchment in corruption to the public as well as civil society's determination to confront the problem. This case would not have become public without FONAC's intervention. Today, when citizens are victims of corrupt behavior, they trust FONAC to come to their rescue. Although contract tampering is still a problem in Benin procurement services, the participation of civil society has led to the strong denunciation by public officials of involved corruption at all levels.



Photo: FONAC

FONAC members discuss complaints of corruption.

