

Farmers' organizations interview presidential candidates on agricultural development

Benin



Investing in rural people

Country-level policy engagement aims to support the development and implementation of national policies that shape the economic opportunities for poor rural people. These case studies illustrate that by utilizing innovative mechanisms for policy engagement, large impacts are achievable with limited resources.

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Issues

In Benin, agriculture plays a central role in the national economy, contributing 32 per cent of GDP and employing a large part of the workforce. Despite significant productive potential and a diversified agricultural sector (crop production, livestock, non-timber forest products, fisheries), the country relies heavily on imports of food products, which represent 25 per cent of the total value of imports.

There are a number of farmers' organizations active in Benin, and over the years these have sought to put their views to the government on how best to improve the performance of the sector for the benefit of the rural population. For example, farmers' organizations ensured that the national *Plan Stratégique de Relance du Secteur Agricole* (PSRSA) recognized the central role played by family farms, and they lobbied for the development of a pastoral code and regulations to implement the land tenure code.

In March 2016, Benin held presidential elections. A total of 33 candidates stood for election and a vigorous debate emerged around the social and economic challenges facing the country. Three major apex farmers' organizations – the *Fédération des Unions des Producteurs du Bénin* (FUPRO), the *Plateforme Nationale des Organisations Paysannes et de Producteurs Agricoles* (PNOPPA) and the *Chambre nationale d'agriculture du Bénin* (CAN) – seized the chance to challenge candidates on their proposals for the country's agricultural development in order to foster political commitment to the agricultural sector.

Actions

The initiative involved organizing and documenting public interviews with all candidates in the presidential election about their ideas for developing the agricultural sector. It aimed to improve the policy environment for the agroforestry and pastoral sectors in Benin for family farmers and their organizations, and to position agroforestry and pastoral development at the centre of the presidential debate. It would also enable farmers, herders and fishers in Benin to analyse candidates' programmes according to their interests and to influence agroforestry and pastoral policies for the next five years.

The initiative was developed and managed by FUPRO, on behalf of PNOPPA and CAN. It was cofinanced by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and IFAD, using IMI funding. The funding targeted a number of key activities in the preparation and organization of the interviews.

As a first step, FUPRO mobilized two international consultants to support them in defining a methodology for conducting the interviews with the candidates – one from a research institution in Senegal, which had led a similar process in that country in 2012, and the other specialized in support to farmers' organizations. A detailed agenda for the interviews, as well as a methodology to be used before, during and after the interviews, was designed through consultations with, and contributions from 30 leaders of farmers' organizations from across Benin.

Summary

IMI funding: US\$20,000

Key objectives: To organize and document a series of public interviews for the presidential candidates on their agricultural development programmes.

Lessons and successes: The IMI-supported activities led to increased recognition of farmers' organizations by the public and the newly-elected government. The future president made a number of key development commitments related to the agricultural sector. The interviews set a precedent for farmers' organizations to conduct informed advocacy during the course of the administration and to improve their position with regard to high-level government institutions.

This preliminary consultation was also an opportunity to identify the key topics that would be the basis for the interviews with the candidates. These included: the model of agricultural development to promote in Benin; the legislative framework; the financing of the sector; access to markets; vocational training systems; and, consultation mechanisms between the government and farmers' organizations. The consultants also facilitated the identification of six key principles that farmers wanted to bring to the attention of the candidates: food sovereignty; farmers' identity; agroecological intensification; sustainable management of natural resources; participation and inclusiveness; and, equity and gender.

As a next step, a formal invitation was sent out to the candidates and the logistics prepared for the interviews. Strict rules were defined for conducting the interviews in a politically neutral manner and the media was mobilized to cover the event, including a private television station, Canal 3.

The interviews took place on 29 and 30 January 2016 at the headquarters of FUPRO. Six of the 33 formally registered candidates took part, among them three of the major challengers. (One of the candidates who participated, Patrice Talon, is now president of Benin, while two others took up key positions in the new government – Pascal Irénée Koupaki as State Minister, General Secretary of the Presidency, and Abdoulaye Bio Tchane as State Minister in charge of Planning and Development.) Between 150 and 200 leaders of farmers' organizations, from all regions of Benin, attended the interviews.

Each candidate had the opportunity to make an introductory presentation on his/her agricultural programme. Questions were then taken from the floor and, finally, the principles of the farmers' organizations were read out to the candidate. All the participating candidates committed publicly to respecting those principles, if elected, and to signing a charter to this effect (*Charte paysanne*). Following the interviews, the presentations of all six candidates were synthesized, translated into local languages and disseminated through local radios. Meanwhile, the *Charte paysanne* was submitted to the two candidates who won the first round of the election.

At the end of the process, FUPRO documented the methodology employed and highlighted lessons from the experience for farmers' organizations in Benin. A toolkit is available on CD Rom.

Lessons learned

The experience of farmers' organizations conducting interviews with candidates in a presidential election was a first in Benin. Its organization was a major achievement and its success was due in large part to the ability of the farmers' organizations to unite and commit to a sustainable and flourishing agriculture.

The process offered a number of useful lessons. First, the participatory approach in the design of the methodology, involving farmer representatives from across the country,

promoted strong ownership of the process by farmers. The role of the international consultants was to offer lessons from similar experiences outside Benin and provide guidance for the process in Benin tailored to the national context. The active participation of the leaders of farmers' organizations during the interviews demonstrated their level of interest in the process.

Second, the political neutrality demonstrated by farmers' leaders was instrumental in ensuring the success of the exercise. This neutrality was reinforced by: (a) imposing a strict agenda for the interviews which offered all candidates the same time to present their programme and answer questions, (b) clearly defining the rules of conduct that all participants were required to follow on stage, and (c) banning the use of campaign material by candidates at the site where the interviews were held.

Third, another key success factor was coverage of the interviews by a private television station and use of local radio stations to disseminate the synthesis of all six candidates' interventions and the press to report on the event.

Having said that, the communication strategy was limited by the financial resources available and the high costs of media coverage during the period of the presidential elections. In addition, FUPRO had very limited time to plan and conduct the interviews, as this had to be done prior to the official launch of the candidates' electoral campaigns. This meant that it was not possible to organize training sessions for the journalists prior to the interviews – something that in Senegal had provided good results in terms of promoting media interest in, and ownership of, agricultural development and family farming issues in the country.

Overall, however, the experience of organizing the interviews: (a) brought the challenges of agricultural development in Benin to the electoral campaign; (b) demonstrated that Beninois farmers are capable of defining and defending their positions related to agricultural development, so strengthening their visibility and credibility to partners, (c) enabled farmers' organizations to create the basis for a continued dialogue with the President and the government and achieve a public and formalized commitment from them, and (d) gave the farmers' organizations a clear monitoring and evaluation framework for subsequent policy dialogue.




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