

Trust is an essential ingredient

Government reform in Mali

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Ousmane Oumarou Sidibé has been given no mean assignment. He is responsible for reforming the entire system of governance in Mali. His aim is, first and foremost, to make government more client-oriented. At all levels. Ousmane Sidibé argues that the key to achieving that goal is a major shift in attitude. Such a shift can't be forced. Civil servants will have to be convinced, one at a time, that it is in their own interest. It can be done, he tells Evelijne Bruning, but it will take time, and a lot of money.

Mr Sidibé, you have spent almost 30 years working within or for the government in Mali. What has been your motivation?

I am convinced that good governance can solve problems. Any problem. Without good governance you cannot address any issue of scale. This is the most fundamental problem we face in Africa today. It is such a problem, because the states we have are based on imported colonial structures. These have often resulted in one-party, extremely authoritarian regimes. Such governance systems are not at all in line with the traditional organisational structures we used to have. In the past, everyone knew the rules and understood them. It was easy to participate, if you wanted to. But through these imported systems, people have lost any sense of responsibility for their own destiny. They have become used to being told what to do, from above. To follow orders. That is why we have such a lack of democracy, and even human rights violations. It is all because



Is there a way out of this situation?

Yes. Democracy has to be the basis. We have to promote democracy and decentralisation in all countries in Africa. We need to reform the existing institutions and governance structures. But this is a very long-term process. Here in Mali we have been working on this for ten years now. And we are heading in the right direction. Of course, there are good times as well as bad, but we are getting there.

What have been the key ingredients for your success?

We have put a lot of energy into the process of democratisation and decentralisation. We have ensured the real participation of the population. And we have successfully organised national consultations each time a social crisis threatened. For instance on issues such as education, and the army, and the internal conflict in the North, we have been successful in pulling together all the different political forces. We have some advantages there over other African states. Because we have no ethnic problems in Mali, it is easier to share responsibilities. Different social groups are rather well organised. And we have a tradition of dialogue. People are used to talking to each other, at all levels of society. That also makes it easier to talk to each other at the political level.

But that does not explain it all. We have had to work very hard to get to where we are. In the past year, the Minister of State Reform and our reform team have visited all the actors who are affected by the current reform plans. And I do mean all of them, in every region of Mali. We have presented our plans, and we have listened to their responses. That was not always pleasant. Mobilising the interest and support we needed took time. People were very sceptical, perhaps rightly so, if you consider their experiences in the past. Also, I have had to mobilise people over whom I have no authority.

Yet in the end, that did not matter at all. Because there really is no point in ordering someone to change. You have to show people that the changes you are asking them to make are not a threat to their position. That they stand to gain from them. And you have to be really persistent. This is not difficult for me, because I have worked in the government for so long. I have become a very patient man. And then of course we can help in other ways as well. For example, by introducing an element of competition ? we now select the best service providers, and we really value the winners.

Competition can also be detrimental, though ? didn't you also have some negative experiences in competing with other ministries and agencies involved in this reform project?

Yes, that's true. In the beginning, there was quite a lot of confusion, and mistrust. We were simply not used to working together. But now, we have a perfect symbiosis. Really, we do. We have shared and coherent plans. Because we discovered that we don't actually have to compete at all. We have complementary responsibilities. My team is concerned with the vision, and the political aspects of the reform. And the Ministry of State Reform works on the actual implementation of the plans.

How did you get the different parties involved in this struggle to see that?

You have to make sure that people get away from their desks and meet each other. You must create informal settings where people feel it is safe to talk. To really get to know each other, as real people with real problems. Once that is done, you can go in and explain that you are really not a threat, not aiming to take anybody's place. Only then will they believe you. Because they know you. It just takes time.

For many donors good governance is often a precondition for providing aid. Do you agree with that?

No, I don't. You cannot have good governance if you do not invest in it. Government reform simply costs a lot of money, if you want to do it well. Donors need to have more confidence that things will change in due course. They often want too much too fast. Of course, you should encourage those countries that are making good progress. But you should not impose draconian measures on those who don't. Also, investments are needed in civil society. Because civil society can push governments in the right direction. If the users do not demand better services, that change will not come on its own. Civil servants will not change of their own free will. Human nature does not work like that.

Further reading

X. Furtado (2001)

[Decentralization and Capacity Development: Understanding the links and the implications for programming.](#) Occasional Paper no. 4, CIDA Policy Branch.

T. Hilhorst and G. Baltissen, Eds. (2004)

[Decentralisation in Mali: Putting policy into practice.](#) KIT Bulletin 362. CEDELO/SNV.

B. Levy and S. Kpundeh (2004)

[Building State Capacity in Africa](#) World Bank Institute.

OECD (2005)

[Policy Coherence for Development: Promoting Institutional Good Practice.](#) OECD Development Dimensions series.

D. Olowu (2001)

[Decentralization Policies and Practices under Structural Adjustment and Democratization in Africa.](#) UNRISD.

M. Robinson and S. Friedman (2005)

[Civil Society, Democratisation and Foreign Aid in Africa.](#) IDS Discussion Paper 383.

UNCDF (2005)

[Delivering the Goods: Building Local Government Capacity to Achieve the MDGs.](#) UN Capital Development Fund.

World Bank (2005)

[Enabling Country Capacity to Achieve Results.](#) Comprehensive Development Framework,

progress report, vols. I and II.

Reform Toolkits:

[This series of toolkits](#) for reform practitioners provide guidance on developing effective communications and outreach programmes, building the institutional capacity of business groups to support reform, and managing the reform process.

Links

[Development Policy Management Forum \(DPMF\)](#)

A network focusing on consolidating and institutionalising democratic governance in Africa, and enhancing institutional capacities in order to address the challenges of development and reconstruction in post-conflict countries.

[Governance Resource Centre \(GRC\) Exchange](#)

Hosted by DFID, and compiled by international experts, the GRC Exchange portal provides a focal point for sharing information and ideas about governance in development.

[International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance \(IDEA\)](#)

IDEA uses comparative experience, analysis and dialogue with practitioners to identify examples of good practice and produce tools and guidelines on democracy support. It builds networks of experts, develops training materials and provides strategic advice for those engaged in political reform or supporting of democracy.

[UNDP Democratic Governance](#)

UNDP assists countries to develop institutions and processes that are more responsive to the needs of ordinary citizens, including the poor, by promoting participation, accountability and effectiveness at all levels.

[Urbanet](#)

Network for Regionalization, Decentralization and Municipal Development (GTZ)