

Togo : Consumer access to basic services, a hard quest like elsewhere in the sub-region

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Togolese consumers have not been well provided in spite of reforms carried out by the authorities for a few years. Basic services like water, telephone or electricity remain a luxury for much of them. A regional comparative study on consumer access to basic services in Africa, carried out by Consumers International in January 2006, shows that despite good results achieved in other countries, progress is still to be made in the country.

As a six-million-consumers, small West African country, the quest for access to basic services in Togo is not an easy thing for the majority of the population, given prices increase and therefore limit the purchasing power of consumers. Moreover, structural adjustment policies and the adjustment program for the revival of the economy (PARE) did nothing but generate tensions on the worker's living conditions in all sectors.

Indeed, the combined effects of these policies and the globalisation of the economy under the WTO and the Bretton Woods Institutions made the supply for basic services such as water and the cleansing, electricity, telecommunications and health, being gradually marketed. On the one hand, these services are part of sectors in which developed countries (the EU and the USA) have companies seeking to extend their markets to maximize their profits.

On the other hand, these sectors are crucial for the realization of human rights, both for public services and to give the necessary support to industrial and agricultural production. With the suppression of public subsidies, the access costs to services strongly increased and the Togolese consumers as well as their counterparts of the sub-region must now pay the high market price to afford it.

According to Mr. Mamadou GOÏTA, Socio-economist and coordinator of this study, the AGCS European regime contains pernicious measures which can be used to reduce the ownership of governments in the formulation of their public policies. The right to regulation and maintaining

political flexibility are important for developing countries to make sure that their own development priorities and strategies are implemented. These new methods are worked out to encourage the opening of the developing countries' services markets by taking over their freedom to manage their WTO policy. If these proposals are accepted, developing countries will lose control over their service sectors, including finance, retail, telecommunications, energy and other social and economic services.

The Consumers International sub-regional study on basic services access shows that the Togolese consumers are generally not well provided in terms of access to services. For example, 40% of the Togolese population has access to mobile phones, the network covers approximately 60% of the territory (76% in the cities and 24% in rural areas) and only 20% of the population has access to Plain Old Telephone Service.

In terms of water access, 53% of the urban population of the country and 37% of the people living in rural areas are provided with it. In short, services like water access, energy and telecommunications constitute a headache for populations.

Whereas structural reforms are in progress in all these sectors, consumers are not really involved in the process and have weak knowledge of services sector reform issues such as institutional restructuring, tariffs reform, private sector involvement and regulatory framework. This gap in understanding is often used as a pretext to exclude civil society organisations from debates on reforms.

It appears that in spite of the reform impelled by the Bretton Woods institutions and the WTO, basic services in Africa like water, electricity and telecommunications, are still mainly managed by the public sector. In the sample, Morocco is the only country counting with 90% and 60% of the population with access to water, respectively in the urban and the rural areas.

In Togo, the cover rates are 53% and 37% respectively in the urban and the rural areas. To facilitate access to

services, the authorities use tools such as tariffs and subsidies. However, the tariffs structure is often very complex.

To conclude, access to basic services is one of the major problems faced by consumer organizations in the participating countries. In the big majority of these countries, consumer organizations are not represented in regulatory agencies. When they do, their contribution is very weak because of nomination process in these agencies which allows the representatives from ministries to be dominant in the policy-making process. Then, there is a need for changing this situation and for giving more

voice to the consumers within the regulatory agencies.

The study also showed that in all countries, the urban population has more opportunities than the rural population in terms of access to services. There is a kind of social injustice which can be explained by the fact that those institutional reforms have largely liberalized services. Suppliers are rather motivated by profit maximization and rural areas constitute the poorest part of the countries. Then, these parts where turnover is low are regarded to be irrelevant for investment. There is a need for investing in services in rural areas in order to provide opportunities for people who live there.

This article is written by **Honoré Y. BLAO**, Researcher, Association Togolaise des Consommateurs (ATC), Togo under the project entitled, ‘‘Strengthening Constituencies for Effective Competition Regimes in Select West African Countries’’ (also referred to as 7Up4 Project) with the support of the Department for International Development (DFID), UK; the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Sweden.
