Getting Better in Benin

by Jerome Bibilary

"Serve. First serve the most disadvantaged and the poorest". That is the philosophy of physican and professor Eusobe Magloire Alihonou of Benin, whose hard work and determination have made him a notable success in the field of development research.

Alihonou has had a long career in community health research. As director of a health research centre and Dean of the Health Sciences Faculty at the University of Benin, he has a deep and abiding concern for the future of his country. He is particularly aware of the importance of youth and how, with proper education and development, they can become the effective leaders of tomorrow. Alihonou has proven that good health care need not be expensive but that it does require the full participation of the community.

As his 60th birthday approaches, Professor Alihonou is clear-eyed and seemingly unconcerned, wearing a permanent, assured smile. He has astute observations on many issues and listening to him, one quickly finds oneself inside the mind of an intellectual.

Eusobe's mother was a midwife who travelled the communities of her native land on a succession of assignments serving the most disadvantaged classes of society, watched by her son whom she invariably took with her on her travels. In this way there grew within this future physician a social calling and a desire to help others. At Victor-Ballot College in Porto-Novo, where he went to high school, young Eusobé flourished under the guidance, faith and rigorous training of his teachers, of whom he still says, with great admiration, that they were learned, even if they lacked any impressive degrees. Later, he went into medicine and graduated in 1969 from the Faculty of Medicine, University of Senegal in Dakar.

Alihonou returned to Benin in 1971 as a specialist in gynaecology and obstetrics, but this did not seem to satisfy his need to help others. "Once I was back in my own country, I started working in the maternity hospital in Cotonou. I was working very hard; however, I realized at the same time that I was only reaching a tiny fraction of the population. I concluded that I had to do something which would allow me to help more people. And in order to achieve this noble goal, I had to leave the hospital.

"I could see that Benin as a nation was regularly squandering resources because of inefficient management. To maximize the impact of our meagre resources, we Beninois had to learn better management skills and learn to use appropriate, less costly solutions. In order to achieve this, it was necessary to focus more closely on the countryside, where the majority of the population lives and where living conditions are very poor. This is how I came to work in rural communities."

Alihonou's approach in working with communities is not to proceed with unilateral action ... for that invariably leads to failure; instead, he and his team began by asking the people what their health problems were.

"People told us: 'We need roads so we can get our pregnant women to health care centres quickly. We also
"You can do a lot with little, provided you have the determination, courage, perseverance and expertise," he says. The Primary Health Care Strategy (PHC), for example, the implementation of which led to the famous Bamako Initiative, was designed on the basis of this philosophy. Everything began with a modest project in 1983 in the little village of Pahou, 20 km west of Cotonou: the Pahou Health Development Project.

We began, recounts Professor Alihonou, by using, under their generic name, the essential medication for oral rehydration and vaccination recommended by UNICEF. This enabled us to save an incredible number of children. In 1985, the Benin Ministry of Health incorporated the results of the operation in a national health care program, which gave birth to the Expanded Vaccination/Primary Health Care Program (known under its French initials as PEV/SSP). The program was subsequently extended to Guinea and other countries in the West African sub-region, and ultimately became the Bamako Initiative, which has continued to flourish due to the confidence which the international community finally placed in it. Today, the entire world believes in this initiative, and this has provided all the countries in this part of Africa with public services which are used by an ever-increasing percentage of the population.

Initially set up to implement primary health care in the areas of services, research and training, the Pahou Health Development Project, after it generated the Bamako Initiative, was rapidly overtaken by its own dynamics.

At Alihonou's urging, and in close cooperation with the population it serves, the project's management and research team expanded the scope of its activities to include the development dimension. In 1989, the project was remodelled into a Regional Health and Development Centre (CREDESA) whose research and training programs both IDRC and CIDA have supported.

CREDESA is thus a tool of economic and social development which uses a multidisciplinary approach based on inter-sectoral cooperation: sociologists, agronomists, economists, doctors, nurses, midwives and social workers.

The key to CREDESA's success lies in the ability to make the tripod of decision-makers, professionals and communities work on solving a range of problems: setting priorities, choosing solutions, implementing them, evaluating the results and programming. Hence the necessity for an ongoing dialogue between the three elements of the tripod. The degree of participation by each element in the dialogue depends on the educational level in the communities: hence the need to provide schooling for 80 to 90% of school age children. This will endow communities with genuine autonomy in acquiring useful knowledge. In order for this process to reach full fruition, however, there is a 10 or 20-year waiting period before everything functions in a sustained, rigorous manner with the players involved having adopted a spirit of self-denial and sacrifice. It is precisely this which is not always easy to achieve.

For Professor Alihonou, it is a question of patience and courage, qualities which he possesses in the fullest measure. With one eye to the future, he works with a number of talented young people trained in top universities, most of whom speak French and English, who will eventually become his successors.

Alihonou has boundless faith in the youth of Africa, and of Benin in particular. "If you help the young people of Benin, they can succeed. I have fought to provide young people with conditions conducive to acquiring knowledge and they have astonished me."

Alihonou also maintains an unshakable faith in the genius of his people. He unhesitatingly cites as an example the peaceful transition of his country from a Marxist dictatorship to a democracy as additional proof of the intelligence and genius of Benin’s people.