

# ENHANCING CAPACITIES through the SYSTEMIC and ACTION-RESEARCH APPROACH – the SARA

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## *Abstract*

Among the responsibilities of the Municipalities, sanitation (solid wastes disposal system) and transfer of competencies about water works, stand high on their agenda. For both these issues, SNV joined efforts respectively with the local focal point of GWP and with GTZ. The core principles of the Systemic and Action-Research Approach – the SARA – are based on bringing together all concerned actors of an issue at stake – including the national decision-makers – and facilitate their take over of an iterative process of change. This iterative process produces consciousness, knowledge and it leads to change.

## *Keywords*

Action-research; decentralization; sanitation; systemic analysis; transfer of competencies.

## *Introduction*

**The process of Decentralization in Benin** was introduced formally in 1999 with a first set of Laws, and followed in 2001 by their approval and implementation modalities. Mayors were elected for the first time in 2003. The next Mayor election will be held after 5 years of tenure – in 2008. This is to say that the process is recent, and that it is the first generation of Mayors that is active nowadays.

Besides that, one should not forget that Benin has been ruled under a communist regime during the years 1972-1990. And while President Kerekou introduced such regime, he himself also did put a final term to it, and moreover allowed the introduction to a clear democracy-oriented regime. And in early 2006 – after 27 years of presidency – a new President came to be elected amid an impressive and internationally recognized self-controlled and democratic election process.

So, over the last 16 years, the country has been through a rather peace-full process of change: from a communist regime towards its own form of democracy. And the decentralization process has been taking place with a noticeable rhythm. This means among others, that there is an inner capacity to question one's self – and to accept to be questioned (!) – and there is the ability to move together from one position to another one, in a constructive and democratic manner – with exceptions also, of course...

**The water & sanitation sector in Benin** is the responsibility of three distinctive institutions, besides the Ministry of Economic Development and Finances (MDEF): the Ministry of Mines,

Energy and Water (MMEE - Rural Water supply), the stated-owned company (SONEB - Urban Water supply), and the Ministry of Public Health (MSP - Sanitation sector).

A National Strategy for Rural Water Supply sector was drafted first in the late nineties, and then reviewed and adapted to the Decentralization Policy and to the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) for the period 2005-2015. Throughout this document, the role of the Municipalities as “owner” or main responsible for the water works and the State’s responsibility to facilitate the transfer of competencies, have both been insisted upon. Subsidiarity and State’s Responsibility principles are unambiguously expressed.

For the Urban Water Supply as well as for the Sanitation sectors, similar document have been more recently finalized, and coordination between concerned authorities is taking place as well. Finally, the Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM) principles have also been recently added in terms of National Policy references – opening to activities involving many actors in a multi-sector approach.

In terms of funding, the water & sanitation sector is receiving substantial support from major donors and also international and national institutions. The financial mobilization will be commensurate to the MDG – because Benin is acknowledged to be able to cope with these goals. Funding mechanisms from donors through the State institutions are getting coordinated since quite recently as well - common and harmonized procedures are set up according to the “Declaration de Paris”.

So by and large, the water & sanitation sector and the concerned institutions are gradually but steadily changing towards efficient and democratic procedures.

... However, there are difficulties.

One of them nowadays stands with the transfer of competencies – and even more with the devolution of means - from the State and Departmental levels to the Local level (Municipalities – locally elected bodies). The main hurdle for the full transfer of competencies and means stands in the paradigms about the institutional and technical capabilities and capacities at Municipal level, and about the (historical) roles & responsibilities of the State institutions – together with the subsequent “loss of power” drawn in with the decentralization policy. So, these are highly “sensitive” issues, and time-bound results are expected by all concerned actors, including donor agencies.

Another domain where there are serious threats is the one of Water Resource protection, specifically in order to avoid disasters caused by Solid Wastes and “Brown Waters”. This was found recently through a serial of workshops undertaken at various levels and by different institutions. While for the “Sanitation sector”, it is the Municipalities that are supposed to handle such situations, in fact little if anything is done in this respect.

This paper aims to share experiences on these issues, specifically in the way to handle them through innovative processes, totally owned by the concerned actors, and generating adapted solutions and lasting changes. This paper relates to on-going processes taking place for the last 7 months, in two out of twelve departments of the country – namely Mono and Couffo, from the southern part.

Both experiences referred to in this paper have been designed and are taking place through SNV-Benin. This Dutch Development organization has been present in Benin over the past 32 years. Among others, SNV-Benin has been very actively involved in the implementation of water-works as well as of sanitation facilities. However, since 2002, SNV as an institution has fundamentally changed its approach towards development: it has become a support institution, specialized in enhancing capacities. In Benin, SNV is acknowledged for its strong support to the decentralization process and to the Municipalities in particular.

## ***Methodology***

Drawing from three common working examples, we do suggest initiating and starting development activities with a system-cum-process-based approach – the SARA. After presenting the process itself, two experiences in the water & sanitation sector are being described and analyzed.

A researcher's or a scientist's logic stands basically within a hypothesis to be used as basis for orienting experiments in order to find a solution to a given problem, or to come to a conclusion leading to a theory or to a model. We name this as a "linear logic" – see Figure 1. Therefore, the researcher operates generally in a "closed environment" where he would allow only a limited number of parameters that he would handle or could control directly himself. This approach is often "individualistic" and demanding in terms of academic qualification. But, this is an educational background for most of us, specifically during the years including high school, university or any institution into which one learns about a job or about a professional competency. It may grow so much so that our competency has become part of such a logical system. And thus it may appear later on quite difficult to change such paradigm... or to deal with other paradigms.

>>>>(figure 1)

In both public institutions and private companies, decisions are made according to settled rules & procedures, and to orders given by the hierarchy. The decision mechanism, or chain of command, is another "linear logic". In addition, it is even crystallizing a specific power at each respective level. Persons or individuals may be identifying themselves accordingly. And each institutional set up has its own rules about working and making decisions. So, having a number of them working together (and this includes individuals and personalities), may be found quite

difficult according to the corporate culture that differs from one institution to the other. Furthermore, when an organization is successful, little if attention is being paid in terms of social solidarity or in respect of development objectives.

>>>>(figure 2)

In the case of the “development” sphere – the one of the development projects and programs we are dealing with – there is almost always a reference to the “logical framework” in a project document. However, is it clear that this kind of logic was initiated first within the army ...? where “linear logic ” is the way to get things done according to a pattern issued from a specific level of decision. The “logical framework” that started in the army during the 40s, was taken over by the private sector in the 60s, and translated into its own needs. And since the early 80s, it was also formally translated into the development sphere... So we are nowadays contemplating at consequences of more than 25 years of formal “logical framework” in this sphere...

However, summarizing “linear logic” should not be done hastily. Indeed, this logic has lead to much efficiency and effectiveness. The analytical skills required have enhanced capabilities of many professionals. It has also lead to numerous new paradigms, strategies, tools, etc. – including in the development sphere. Therefore, it remains a major working method, for everyone.

But at the same time, there is a drawback with the “linear logic”: it has streamlined all of us to an excessive extent... as it became almost the only working method.

And it is probably a reason – if not the main reason – for having development efforts concentrated most on “hardware results” - rather than on “software processes” - even while introducing participatory approaches. And while much is underway to improve socio-economic parameters in under-developed countries – see the MDG, SPRP, Budget Support, etc. – the reality appears more complex than ever before, making it more difficult to reach the targets. However, in such a context, are “result-oriented strategies” enough and appropriate to handle the complexity mentioned?... What has changed in terms of approaches between the SAP of the eighties and the SPRP of the present days? In fact not much changed, and one should fear about the (lack of) results by the coming deadlines. Therefore, in order to ensure improvements of the socio-economic parameters, we believe new responses and new approaches are needed, probably leading to a new development paradigm.

We believe it is necessary to enlarge our strategic vision, up to be able to deal with the parameters of complexity, as mentioned earlier – and with all the concerned actors and institutions at a same time. Among the concerned actors, some can become agents of change and enter into dynamic socio-professional processes including systemic analysis and action-research approach. Spaces of interaction deserve to be opened where such actors from various

backgrounds and levels can meet and find together a solution to their common problem. These observations have led to the approach described hereafter and named the SARA – the Systemic and Action-Research Approach.

The SARA has been inspired originally by some of the available literature about action-research: starting from the early experiences of K.Lewis and Collier (around 1945) and of St.Corey (1949) in the US, to the more recent experiences (since the eighties) in the educational sector, and to some extent in the development sphere. From the “systemic analysis”, SARA has taken the holistic approach up to now. Other principles and tools from this later discipline will gradually assist raising the quality of the SARA methodology. But so far, this is the present early situation that can be drawn. For our convenience, we’ll refer to SARA as the overarching methodology, and we’ll specify the concerned principles involved according to context. The following description of SARA will focus on the basic principles of the approach itself. After that, some critical steps are analyzed with reference to specific experiences in water & sanitation sector.

The first basic principle of the SARA is : all the concerned actors are working together and the national level decision-makers are part of the process. Three circles of persons are concerned – see Figure 3.

(figure3)

Firstly, the “core action-research group” - or the **“Core Group”**. It comprises selected persons (all volunteers) from diverse socio-professional backgrounds and from various levels, concerned by the issue at stake: departmental director, mayor or municipal head of a section, civil society and private sector representatives, etc. Secondly, the **“Peer Group”**. It comprises all concerned actors not involved in the “core group”. They are coming from similar socio-professional backgrounds as the members of the core group. They act as a monitoring unit, following up the progresses made by the sub-groups. The “Peer Group” stimulates the brainstorming around the problematic and thus assists in deepening and giving density to the SARA process – which means creating more consciousness about the issue. They may be involved in the documentation of the SARA process – capitalizing on the knowledge produced by the core group. Beyond the “Peer Group”, there is a third circle of persons: those who need to be informed about the process taking place because their opinion is influential or decisive – we’ll call this the **“Circle of Influence”**. It is composed by persons belonging to higher levels of responsibility and who are often working in the capital. In our case they are as follows: General Director and Directors of Ministry departments, Heads of Offices from International NGOs, from the Donors and from the international executing Agencies, Experts and Resource Person in the sector, etc. It is felt important to keep them informed about the ongoing process and about the outputs, specifically when dealing with an issue that has a national impact – which is the case of the transfer of competencies for the water & sanitation sector. The sensitivity of the theme – whether political, institutional, technical, financial, etc. – requires a follow-up of each

step by those decision-makers. Personalized visits are even foreseen in order to strengthen the linkages and to avoid creating a “happening” followed by feelings of neglect, etc. By adding such circle one further avoids working in a closed environment or with an individualistic approach. And this circle gives respect to the existing hierarchies.

The second basic principle of SARA is the “work together” mode. Action-research is not about an individual effort. It is about a group effort, and about our own efforts into that group. And the added value issued from a “group work” goes much beyond the total of the individual efforts – not because it is “superior” but mainly because it is different in nature as it results from the mix of many domains and from the variety of the concerned actors. This synergy effect is not specifically linked to the action-research approach, however action-research approach does systematically call upon it and as such it is a characteristic of the action-research itself.

The second basic principle of SARA is about the fact that it allows integration of complex situations and dynamic processes - something that linear thinking would have many difficulties to take into account and to work with. There is even no fear entering into complex situations. Indeed, action-research’s principle creates a working space that does not require us to abandon our personalities, though it does call for cooperation with other actors. In a way, one can say that it is a specific kind of mindset and of momentum that we enter into – voluntarily. And it concerns our individual as well as social, professional, etc. aspects of life; and thus our paradigms.

The fourth basic principle, SARA does call for creating tools adapted to the working context. Indeed, action-research has no predefined tools or frames to enter into or to work with – the idea of a pre-defined tool is almost contrary to the approach...! There is even hardly any single one way explanation to action-research ...It is not formalized through any internationally recognized document, and it would be difficult to do so, probably. Any action-research activity is more or less specific as far as its tools are concerned. And this is one of the reasons it calls for documenting the process, all the way long.

Fifth basic principle of SARA: it can be described as an iterative process into which the actors themselves increase consciousness, develop knowledge and where change becomes reality . It can be represented under the form of a spiral, evolving around four main phases: 1/ the Problematic is identified and Consciousness is developed; 2/ a Field Activity takes place; 3/ Results are analyzed - and this bring changes gradually, and 4/ the solution(s) issued are documented and Knowledge is produced. While analyzing the results (in 3), a deeper level of the problematic that was not foreseen before may be identified, and then one starts again the cycle. However, by every turn, there is an incremental value to the work.

>>>(figure 4)

Finally, there is something special also in SARA concerning *the “Facilitator” role*. Indeed, the Facilitator is always an “outsider”, in the broadest sense – at least in the beginning. The Facilitator has little involvement into the process itself and does not accompany the concerned actors during their meetings – in order to give way for ownership of the process by the actors themselves. The Facilitator aims at having the “core action-research group” question the problematic adequately and deeply and, (s)he gives support to increase the group’s efficiency in the iterative process. The Facilitator supports organizing and running the regular meetings (monthly basis) of the Core Group with the Peer Group.

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE

The description hereafter refers to some critical steps of the SARA. It is to be noticed that the first of two experiences in the water & sanitation sector started only 7 months ago. Hands-on experience aren’t yet numerous and dense and in addition, weaknesses have appeared during implementation, especially in the first experience. They are analyzed hereafter. On the other hand, SARA’s impact on the various circles of concerned actors is also brought to light as it gives some insight about the power of the momentum initiated.

Before setting up a SARA with any group of concerned actors in any given domain, the Facilitator has to undertake an extensive analysis. This is the inception phase. It should provide the following: a deep understanding of the concerned domain and actors – including the main problems at stake; a network of socio-professional resource persons; specific identification of a well balanced “core action-research group” and also of the different circles of the SARA set up. The very next or simultaneous step is the shared understanding with the main decision-makers as to the SARA principles and the contractual arrangements with representatives of the stakeholders and, with a donor agency: Credibility and funding of the process need to be secured.

The “Field Activity” – or the learning from others - is a critical step into which the sub-groups should enter, rapidly. Indeed, once the problematic has been clarified, the principle is to find out from resource persons, institutions, experts, documents, etc., how they handled similar situations, what kind of lessons they did learn from them, whom else should be investigated, which documents should be further analyzed, etc. This step is powerful, bringing new knowledge, new tools, etc. and assisting raising capacities practically. It leads also to new bounds of solidarity between Municipalities – like opening to inter-municipal set ups. And while different actors are travelling altogether, besides gathering knowledge and information, the members of the sub-group also discover each others’ paradigms and confrontation occurs. At the end confidence raises among them – or the group might split, but this is less likely to occur. Indeed, they feel participating in something new and valuable because issued from their collective work and from their own personal and voluntary commitment.

The “Result analysis” step (or the monitoring phase) is prepared once a month – the frequency is to be high enough to keep the process under some pressure, but it should be adapted to the concerned issue at stake. The Facilitator assists this meeting by preparing and moderating it. The “Peer Group” will analyze the results and recommendations made by the core group. The “Peer Group” will also assess the progress of their work - as such they act as a monitoring and controlling unit. And on the other hand, while approving results or recommendations, they are giving credibility to the SARA process and they are developing a consensus for a long-lasting solution. Indeed, it is assumed that if it is the concerned actors who are leading such kind of investigations, they are better suited to capitalize on those experiences because they can better take into account a number of complex parameters that too often outsiders or experts have never been able to grasp. However, it also explains why an iterative process is needed, as a result never becomes an appropriate solution in one single step. But finally, adapted results or recommendations are identified. So, this step is a powerful way of change. And while all this happens, ownership is gradually taken over by the actors and the Facilitator’s role fades away naturally.

The documentation step is critical, among others in order to develop and share knowledge, but also and specifically in order to reach the decision-makers, or the “Circle of Influence”. For the latter, tailor-made information is to be prepared: short and up-to-the-point.

#### Analysis of the Field work realities

**The first action-research experience** started with the protection of the water resources – specifically against threats from solid wastes. Six Municipalities asked SNV to assist them in their solid wastes disposal system - in the Couffo Department, south of Benin. Furthermore, through the Partnership between SNV and the Global Water Partnership (GWP-Benin), the funding of the action-research process could be budgeted and it was an opportunity to undertake a typical Integrated Water Resource Management (IWRM). However, as GWP-Benin could not cover all expenses, therefore an additional agreement was foreseen with another International NGO, also SNV’s partner. But this latter was never finalized.

At the inception and while carrying the first action-research activities on “solid wastes disposal systems”, the present methodology wasn’t yet much elaborated. Therefore, some delays in the process itself have been experienced, though the concerned group of resource persons kept its enthusiasm and carries specific activities s.a.: situational analysis; meetings in order to set up an inter-municipal organization according to Laws & Rules, or meetings for the Terms of Reference for Environmental Impact Assessment - EIA - about a final solid wastes disposal system; etc. The group of persons involved comprises municipal’s head of sections – local development or infrastructures.

However, two setbacks occurred: 1/ funds could not be ensured for the whole process and 2/ there was a lack of formal organizational set up. This resulted into lack of “Field Activities”

because funds could not be secured for the whole process – among others for the transports, visits, daily expenditures, etc. for the field activities. And secondly, because it missed an appropriate Peer Group right from the beginning of the process. So, without a Peer Group well into place and doing its monitoring work among others, there's no specific and qualitative output. It means that the Facilitator alone can't and shouldn't assist the process: SARA works when owned by the concerned actors.

Despite these early days' conceptual defaults, the concerned group of persons continues preparing and documenting its findings. They aim at holding a joint meeting with the concerned Mayors and to deciding about the future set up needed. The aim is to prepare the grounds for a formal organizational set up.

**The second experience** is dealing about a sensitive issue in the water & sanitation sector: the transfer of competencies from departmental (State institutions) to municipal levels (or locally elected bodies) according to the decentralization policy. The present experience takes place as a pilot in the twelve Municipalities of the Mono / Couffo department.

Probably because of the sensitivity of the subject, a substantial amount of time was taken in order to grasp important aspects of this policy, its various stakeholders, its field realities, etc. Many discussions took place between the funding agency (GTZ) and the main Facilitator so that many aspects of the SARA process itself were clarified in details before it would start. This took place between February and June 2006. In the meantime, other international development agencies were undertaking some activities on the same subject – eventually, the two partners would even attend such events. However, such “pressures” did not change the pace of work or the need to deepen the understanding between GTZ and SNV. The understanding between the partners has been important for the relationship, and for the SARA process under implementation – by now the partners have their working relationship clearly set and they interact easily about any fact around the process. The same occurs with all local decision-makers. This inception phase was the opportunity to finalize contractual aspects, including with another partner (a local NGO) in charge of the logistics. So, all formal aspects were almost in control right from the beginning of the SARA process. Among them, the funding had been agreed upon. The identification of the core group was done, while the Peer Group and the Circle of Influence were identified more recently.

After three months of SARA process on the transfer of competencies, the following are the main results: 1) a plan for the transfer of competencies starts taking shape and problematic areas have been solved on *ad hoc* basis. This means a good level of dialogue among the concerned actors, and also their commitment to find solutions. 2) the Circle of Influence is showing more than a mere interest: decision-makers at national level asked specific questions, they raised their interest to join the process, they called for documentation, they showed availability when requested as resource person, etc. and they also showed deep concern about the process itself!

So, apparently while many considered the transfer of competencies to become a nightmare - because of its complexity and sensitivity – the “systemic and action-research approach” (SARA) has come with some evidence to be a possible and credible way to progress towards change in a difficult institutional set up.

However, and despite numerous positive signs, some weaknesses in the process also did appear. First, the analytical skills required to deepening the problematic up to its core and most critical aspects is a demanding task – that needs to be prepared at individual level, and then shared at group level. And maintaining an up-to-date follow-up system leading to knowledge development is another critical request of the process – also unusual for the participants. These two critical aspects ought to become main subjects for enhancing capacities of concerned actors. It means the SARA process itself has to provide practical trainings in these domains. The second flaw in the process at this stage lies with Time: projects have to justify results at the end of the day. They are time bound. Whether the SARA is process-based and as such it belongs more to an ongoing movement. So, funding of such process is never satisfied according to project logic ... unless decision-makers can be convinced about it. In other words, replicating this experience is maybe going to be challenging but worthy.

### ***Lessons learned***

The two experiences brought much learning already, not only on the organisational side, but also about the content, the capitalization, the concerned actors, etc. These lessons can be summarized as follows:

How more sensitive an issue, how more knowledge of the domain is requested and how more lead time should be taken in order to set up the SARA process.

Supportive measures ought to be aimed at the “change agents” in the following :assist in the deepening of the problematic and the sharpening of the analytical skills in the early stages of the process; organize trainings related to such issues as Dialogue, Change in Attitudes, Leadership, etc.; organize panel discussions ; assist in identifying resource persons, etc.

Invest in the Peer Group - specially the Mayors and politicians – for them taking over their responsibility with full swing. This could need training or sensitization or capacity development in the following: monitoring & evaluation techniques; rapid appraisal techniques; knowledge management; strategic planning techniques; general management issues; ID/OD/HRD; etc. All should lead to increased capacities of this specific group.

The “Circle of Influence” is of great importance for the support and credibility of the whole process. Indeed, it is a source to enrich the process, if not saving it against some odds - as it often happens in situations of change. Additionally, the respect of the decision-makers deserves to be practised in a proactive manner – one can build on values shown during the recent political events like the campaign for the Presidency. Also, a simple visit followed by meetings,

were instrumental in bringing GTZ to lead the SARA on the transfer of competencies – taking decision-makers in the field and documenting them appropriately does pay for the process to be recognized and sustained.

The strength of personal commitment : it is striking to see the impact of SARA on the members of the core group: they share the feeling of something they can identify themselves to – even though the results are not at their expectations for the moment. They feel a deep value-change in this approach and a large opportunity to enhance their capacities. The feeling of participating in something important is present.

Who's in the driving seat?... It's about the Facilitator's role in the process. The handover of this responsibility is part of the process – however, beginning with an external viewer does facilitate take-off for the process.

At this stage, much is still expected to happen and more lessons will be learned every day of SARA's implementation. However, the conclusion belongs to the concerned actors as well as to the “Circle of Influence”, and this is where we can assert that they express good feelings about the process – should this mean something is starting to change in the development sphere through this approach...? It's too early to say so, but at least it gives everyone the feeling to have initiated and be part of something that one feels at ease with – at all levels.

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