

The Toffin people – those who suffer most in Benin?

Reflexions of the meeting of the Nokoué project, held on the 21st of November 2013 in Paris

- *by Jørgen Olsen, member of the World Council of Political Actions and International Solidarity in Emmaus*
- *the reflexions are consulting and personal and do not oblige neither my basic member organization (GtU of Denmark), nor the other members of WC PAIS.*

Generally spoken I was very satisfied after the meeting – the economy, the technical aspects, and the organization all seem to function the best way.

The total number of beneficiaries of the project is 70.000. I have understood that there are another 55.000 persons living close to the lake or on stilts within the lake – and that practically all of the 125.000 belong to the ethnic group, the Toffins. During the era of slavery the Toffins installed at the lake to escape from being captured as slaves. They settled as fishermen, a way of living becoming more and more difficult because of the water pollution. Besides fishing they live from trade, handicraft and a little bit of agriculture and cattle breeding along the lake.

The dirty water has made the living very difficult for the Toffins: Some 25% of households settle for using the dirty lake water (this becomes almost all households during the rainy season when the water levels rise) or water from nearby sources such as marshes, rivers or holes dug in the ground. Local people sometimes travel kilometres to fetch water supplies.

This lack of safe drinking water obviously has an impact on the health of the local community, but it also has a knock-on effect on the entire social structure: children's schooling is disrupted, many people drown while fetching water and women who have to fetch water are not available for other income-generating activities.

It is very nice and in perfect harmony with the values of Emmaus to give a hand to the excluded, perhaps the most excluded and suffering of Benin. But to avoid discrimination I suggest that in an upcoming phase also the 55.000 will be benefited. Establishing such a great developing project as the Nokoué-project implies a risk of creating tensions. Serving the Toffins by the project does not do any harm to the other approximately 50 ethnics of Benin, but serving some Toffins and not the rest is problematic.

I do not understand why the ethnical aspect is not explained at the site http://emmaus-international.org/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=157&Itemid=129

Another aspect I miss within the information on the project and its context is the general education of the population, may it be the children, the young, and the adults. Only a well educated population will be able to carry on for a large number of years with the organization of the users, AUAEAN, one day the financing and the attention from various exterior organizations will fade away.

Going to school is compulsory for the children, but such an obligation does not always imply that the education is effective. Is there being held alphabetization-courses or other courses – within the project or within other frameworks – for the young and the adults? – Especially when it comes to young people such initiatives could prevent them from leaving the area.

I would also like to know whether the teaching is partially going on in Fon – the most important

language in Benin – or only in French. The language of the Toffins – the Aïzo – is another than Fon, but rather close. Especially for the youngest children of the basic education a teaching in Fon would be an advantage. It is probably not possible – at least not in a close future – that there would be created a written version of the Aïzo, like it already exists of the Fon. It is a complicated work.

It would be interesting to get an evaluation of the education situation of the inhabitants of the lake – there are certainly consultants of other West African countries (this suggested for the neutrality) who could carry out such an evaluation.

Finally I suggest that if other NGO's like for example CARE or Caritas in fact are focused on the area along the lake, that they be contacted in order to improve the conditions of the project. It may not be excluded that they have interesting competences, possibly CARE as far as environmental issues is concerned.