**Republic of Benin \*\*\*\*\* Economic and Social Council \*\*\*\*\*\***

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**The Economic and Social Council**

**Ways, means and scope of dialogue with the civil society**

**Introduction**

The Economic and Social Council (ESC) is a consultative Assembly which appeared in the institutional universe of the French speaking countries few years before the colonies became independent. Inspired by the French model, its creation was impacted by the various socio-ideological movements of African Governments.

In Benin Republic (former Danhomey), the ESC was instituted by the 28th February 1958 Constitution. Concretely, the first experience of Benin ESC took place in 1969 but unfortunately lasted for a very short period (six (6) months) because it was interrupted by 10th December 1969 coup.

Reintroduced by the 11th December 1990 Constitution, Benin ESC resumes its activities in 1992. But in actual fact it was only in May 1994 that a new experience of ESC was re-launched and still continues till today; this is a proof that it plays an important role within the Constitutional Institutions of the Republic of Benin.

1. **The legal and statutory framework**

The Economic and Social Council of Benin is governed by 16th July, 1992 Law N° 92-010 which is the Organic law of the ESC. The current ESC is in the fourth term in office.

The Missions and attribution of the Economic and Social Council are stated in the 1st Article of the above–mentioned Law which states as follows:

* The ESC gives its views on bills, edicts or decrees as well as private bills which are submitted to it;
* It compulsorily gives its views on bills relating to the economic and social fields;
* It could be consulted by the Head of State on any issue relating to the economic, social, cultural and technical domain;
* It could on its own, through recommendations, draw the attention of the Parliament and the Government on economic and social reforms which seem in line or go against the general interest;
* It can also in the same conditions give to the Government its views on the execution of plans or programmes related to the economic and social fields.

The Economic and Social Council is therefore a consultative assembly which gives its views and makes recommendations to the Government and the Parliament on economic, social, cultural, environmental, technical and scientific issues.

1. **Composition of Benin ESC**

Benin ESC is made of 30 members. They come from local authorities, socio-economic forces and the Civil Society organisations. They are represented as follows:

1. Designated personalities (05)
* 3 by the Head of State
* 2 by the Board of Parliament
1. Elected Personalities (25)
* 04 by the employers’ organisations
* 04 by the Trade Unions or workers’ organisations
* 06 by development associations (on the basis of 01 per former Region)
* 02 by artisans’ organisations
* 01 by artists’ organisation and cultural presenter,
* 02 by sport federations
* 02 by liberal professions
* 02 by researcher organisations
* 02 by civil society organisations.

Since ESC members are not elected through universal suffrage, the ESC holds its legitimacy from the quality of its representatives. Such diversity in the representation is based on two principles:

* All economic and social activities are represented;
* So far as the activity is integrated in a representative national organisation, the latter has the power to designate the members who will represent the concerned activity within the institution.

Since it is made of all the socio-professional categories, the ESC is an entity to which the notion of consensus is of a great importance. It is a privileged and an excellent framework for consultation, exchange and social dialogue. With this open approach, it is easy for it to collaborate with Benin civil society when carrying out some of its activities.

C –**Summary of some major activities carried out during the 4th term in office**

In order to diversify its activities, Benin ESC carried out some activities with the civil society of Benin which are as follows:

* **The international seminar on the 50th independence anniversary of Benin**

The Economic and Social Council organised on 27th , 28th and 29th July 2010, with the support of the Government of Benin and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in Cotonou Palace of Congress, an international Seminar on the 50th independence anniversary of Benin on the theme:’’ 50th anniversary and the issue of prosperity in Benin.’’

This seminar which was organised within the framework of the 50th anniversary of the Independence of Benin witnessed the participation of all the major components of the Nation within which the civil society is highly represented.

Apart from its evaluation of the political, economic and socio cultural situation, the objective of the seminar was to determine a series of orientations and strategic action programmes that will give a new dynamic to Benin development for the coming decades. A the end of the seminar, recommendations were made and were well received by Benin Government, the civil society, official bodies and the Technical and Financial Partners.

* **The International Seminar on « the Role of Economic and Social Council as promoters and actors of the implementation of the Global Jobs Pact**”

The seminar was held from 12th to 13th October 2010 at the Cotonou Congress Palace. It was jointly organised by the Economic and Social Council of Benin, the International Labour Organisation (ILO), the International Association of Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (AICESIS) and the Union of African Economic and Social Councils and Similar Institutions (UCESA).

The objective of the seminar was to popularized and to put into effect the Global Jobs Pact through the capacity building of ESC members and the institution of a true partnership between the various parties that adhered to the pact. The authorities and staff of Benin ESC rallied toward the organisation of the seminar with the support of NGO’s managers who are active in local governance and in the promotion of youth employment. It also got the support of the International Labour Bureau as well as the officers of African and European ESC. The over hundred participants who took part in the seminar, follow with great interest the various stages of the seminar which ended on a commitment made by the ESC present at the seminar called ‘**’The Declaration of Cotonou’’**. The implementation of such Declaration was translated some months later, in April 2011, in Dakar in Senegal, into the adoption of the recommendations and actions proposed in the form of a document entitled: **‘’Dakar Road map’’.**

* **The national public awareness campaign for appeased elections in Benin in 2011**

Within the framework of the presidential and parliamentary elections held in Benin in 2011 and in its quest to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and to create an appropriate climate for the organisation of free and fair elections which will be accepted by all, the Economic and Social Council, in collaboration with the High Commissioner for Concerted Governance with the support of the United Nations Development Programme, organised on 27th January, 08th and 10th February 2011, a national campaign to increase public awareness for peaceful elections. The objective of such campaign is to let peace prevail before, during and after the elections.

Cotonou, Parakou and Abomey were the three big cities chosen to organise information and communication sessions through messages to the Nation, sketches, singing by artists and cultural activities’ groups.

 Cotonou held the official launching ceremony of the national campaign of awareness for peaceful elections in Benin in 2011. The political authorities and all the socio-professional categories were invited. On the occasion peace, tolerance, dialogue and friendship messages were sent to citizens and to political actors during the election period.

In Parakou and Abomey, the same message was sent to the populations. On those various occasions, the latter have been asked to contribute to the consolidation of democracy and to institute an atmosphere conducive to the organisation of free and fair elections that will be acceptable to all and to fight at all cost pride, selfishness, intolerance and lack of pardon.

All the speeches were translated into local or regional languages. Therefore the ESC played an active role in the social mobilisation for peaceful, free and fair elections in Benin.

* **Contribution towards the resolution of social crisis**

The Social and Economic Council has an old tradition as regard the resolution of social crisis. The fourth term also sacrificed to this tradition. For that matter, it was implied in the various crises which cropped up in Benin the previous years especially between the government and the central Trade Unions.

In fact, the 2010 University teachers strike was threatening the academic year. It became urgent to act on the matter. Within that framework, Benin ESC took the initiative to undertake negotiations with the trade unions of higher education. Their claim aimed at improving their living and working conditions as well as improving upon teachers and students research and training conditions. After several meetings, organised under the supervision of the President, the ESC was able to bring the protagonists to the negotiation table. The different parties at stake, that is, the Government and the Trade Unions, reached a compromise which led to an agreement. Finally, the University teachers’ salary was increased and this brought the crisis to an end.

The intervention of the ESC had also been beneficial in October 2010 when a crisis which led to a lot of strikes cropped up in the Finance Administration. The strikes were launched by the Federation of the Finance Workers Trade Union following the disappearance of one of their colleagues: ’’DANGNIVO Affair’’, this crisis last for eight (8) months and its consequences on the State finances were obvious. Finally, the consensus triumphed and the finance administration went back to work.

In the same year, the ESC also intervened in the health sector which was experiencing strike without minimum service. The Economic and Social Council played it part and the Front of United Health Trade Union which started the strike finally put an end to it.

That same year 2010, when the teachers of the public nursery, primary and secondary schools went on strike, the ESC became very active in the negotiations with their Trade Unions and the Government in order to avoid a new crisis. With the help of the ESC, all the parties at stake went to the negotiation table and started the dialogue to solve the issue.

At this very moment, the ESC is trying to resolve a crisis that has cropped up at the Benin Chamber of Commerce and Industry.

* **Benin ESC national solidarity gesture following the flooding**

Benin witnessed these last years the real impacts of climate change. This was shown through flooding that destroyed crops and rendered thousands of Beninese homeless in some Region of the country. Cotonou, the economic capital was also affected. Within that framework, Benin ESC made toward the populations who were affected, national solidarity gestures by giving them financial aid and wise advice. All the High Counsellors were in the field in all the regions affected by flooding to give good advice to the population who were in need of information on how to live in a hygienic environment in these crucial moments. Real exchanges sessions took place using Information, Education and Communication (IEC) steps.

All these actions consolidate the dialogue framework in our country and show how Benin ESC is useful for Benin State. But how is Benin ESC able to implement all these actions?

**Activities implementation Mechanisms**

The following has to do with the ways and means the Institutions use to make a successful dialogue with the civil society.

To be precise, we could say that the ESC use the following means to achieve its objectives:

* **All inclusive social dialogue**: all the parties implied in the issue are taken into account during ESC negotiation process or during the exchanges made to diagnose the sources of the problem and to find solution to it.
* **Negotiation**: As soon as a crisis crops up, the ESC activates an automatic internal alert system to monitor the situation. As soon as it seems to become serious, contacts are made in order to start negotiations with the real actors or legitimate representatives of the parties in conflict.
* **Social management and marketing**: Benin ESC is made of a panel of personalities full of real and divers experiences. Counting on those various personalities, each in his domain, the ESC is able to find the ways and means to solve the problems of Benin Nation.
* **Defence and Lobbying**: the way the managers lend an ear to issues at all levels as well as the know-how of the members of the Board of Meeting and of the President, enable to solve a lot of problems leading to peace keeping in our country. The Conference of Constitutional Presidents of the Republic is a perfect melting pot to discuss crucial issues facing our country. In order to prevent as well as to solve important problems facing the Nation, issues are discussed and concrete, objective and patriotic proposals are made.
* **Partnership**: Having great ideas is good but the most important thing is to have the means to implement them. That’s why, we are seizing this opportunity to thank Benin Government which has always given its support to the ESC‘s activities as well as the Technical and Financial Partners such as UNDP, ILO, UNDESA, AICESIS and very soon IOF.

**Conclusion**

Far from confiding itself in its constitutional role that is to give its consultative advise or view to the Government or to the Board of the Parliament, on economic, social, cultural, environmental and technical issues, the Benin ESC embarked on various development activities. In order to keep a social watch, the Institution works everyday to facilitate social dialogue and intervenes when need be to facilitate the resolution of crisis.

The Institution intervenes in order to prevent conflicts and promote good governance and preserve social peace.

In view of all these activities, it is easy to realise that the Economic and Social Council plays an important role in the constitutional and institutional universe of Benin.