

BENIN / A Canadian is rebuilding the tiny African country's administration.

Dysfunctional bureaucracy *(A)* on the mend

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WELCOME to the office of the president of Benin," Rollande Montsion says with a sigh. "It's the pits."

For the past two years, Ms. Montsion has welcomed visitors to her unmarked office in Benin's presidential palace, where she struggles almost single-handedly to reshape one of Africa's most dysfunctional bureaucracies.

With no computer, secretary or external telephone line, Ms. Montsion, a Hydro-Québec executive seconded to this tiny West African country, must serve as a postmodern mercenary of sorts, a dog of peace advising reformist President Nicéphore Soglo on how to put Benin's public administration back on its feet.

"We have absolutely nothing: no means, no money, no equipment," she said. "It's close to chaos."

To create order from chaos, Ms. Montsion faces a Herculean challenge. Despite Benin's rapidly growing population of 5.8 million, the government must cope with a budget about \$2.5-billion (U.S.) this year — that is slightly less than half the annual revenue of Hydro-Québec.

To this add a government bureaucracy that barely works after 17 years of military dictatorship, which ended in 1989. In the president's secretariat, one in five people cannot read or write. Most secretaries cannot type a letter.

In Ms. Montsion's office, one fluorescent light serves the room, with its cracked walls, tattered pink flowered curtains and single filing cabinet. An old air-conditioner whirrs like a cargo plane ready for takeoff. Ms. Montsion wanted to install a computer when she arrived early in 1994, but discovered "we don't even have a socket."

Even the early-model telephone on her desk is not much use. To make an outside call she must book the number with the palace operator, who can take days to reply, as 18 staff members must share 17 external lines, 10 of which are reserved for the president. "I can't even call the president's secretary directly," Ms. Montsion said.

The Benin government is so strapped for resources — 70 per cent of its development budget comes from foreign aid — that only this month did it install air-conditioning in the ballroom where 400 guests will dine Saturday night at the biennial Francophonie summit. Ms. Montsion noted that no additional toilets had been installed.

WITH close-cropped red hair and designer eyeglasses, Ms. Montsion, 46, stands out in the president's seaside office like a giant tree in the desert. She did not land in West Africa by design. After 18 years in the public service in Ottawa, lastly in the Auditor-General's office, she joined Hydro-Québec in 1986 as a vice-president. There she met Mr. Soglo's son, who had moved to Montreal as a management trainee.

A former World Bank executive who led Africa's first peaceful transition from military dictatorship to multiparty democracy, Mr. Soglo desperately needed administrative advice. His son recommended Ms. Montsion, and soon the president wrote to then Québec premier Robert Bourassa to request her secondment.

"I like to travel," Ms. Montsion said. "I like adventure. I like risks."

She got it all. After meeting the Soglo family at the 1991 Francophonie summit in Paris, Ms. Montsion travelled to Benin the following year during a papal visit. In February, 1994, she moved to Cotonou, Benin's administrative capital, for a two-year assignment that became a tour of perpetual surprise and frustration.

IN the 1970s and '80s, Benin's civil service was stacked with relatives and cronies of the military and political elite, and then was left with no decision-making power, which had been seized by the military. Former president Mathieu Kérékou "organized things like a warrior would," Ms. Montsion said.

After winning a 1991 election and securing financial aid from the West, Mr. Soglo cut the bureaucracy by 7,000 people, to its current size of about 25,000. He fired all bureaucrats with bogus university degrees. He deleted from the payroll the names of deceased persons.

Under strict loan conditions from the International Monetary Fund, the government cannot hire new employees, even though fresh blood is sorely needed. Given a base salary of \$300 to \$500 (U.S.) a month for a presidential adviser, few people want to join the president on his reform crusade anyway.

With such a small pie to cut for so many people, Ms. Montsion feels no lack of animosity from others. "For some of them, they don't understand why they need a white person to do this," she said. "I agree with them. Then I say, 'No Beninese will come to do this job.'"

While some technocrats have returned to Benin from organizations such as the World Bank and African Development Bank, the bureaucracy is still dominated by the lethargic remnants of the ancien régime, which placed status over progress. Emerging from military rule and a local culture of harmony, many bureaucrats are not willing to make decisions. "They want to change, but they are still very scared," Ms. Montsion said.

The foundation blocks of civil society, from an independent judiciary to a credible commercial law, are not yet on their feet. Much of the bureaucracy, which is laden with corruption, is controlled by opposition interests as well. "Companies come, look at the system and say, 'No thank you,'" Ms. Montsion said.

In the past two years, however, Benin has slowly created a new public administration that is "neither French nor Canadian," she said. It includes new divisions between the bureaucracy and politicians, in an effort to create professional administration. "It's very little progress, but it is in the right direction."

For Ms. Montsion, the most difficult part of her assignment is to see how Benin's extreme poverty arouses so little concern among government officials. "President Soglo sees it as urgent, but he's the only one," she said.

Her secondment is scheduled to end in May, two months after the presidential election is to be held. If she is asked to extend her stay, Ms. Montsion said she will set a few conditions. One of them: an electric outlet.