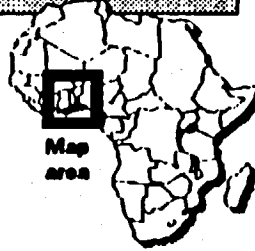


F.I.D.



# Quebecer meets Herculean task in Benin

**TOUGH JOB:** Turning the office of the president of Benin into a modern, efficient operation is like restructuring the Prime Minister's Office plus the Privy Council Office with one telephone shared by 48 others.

By Peter Maser  
Citizen Africa correspondent

**COTONOU, Benin** — It will never be said that Rollande Montsion lacks courage or patience or a sense of adventure, and heaven knows she has needed them all.

Two years ago she was a senior executive with Hydro Quebec and enjoyed the conveniences of the corporate world. Today, at 46, she occupies a square, gloomy office with grey walls and a single fluorescent bulb. She has a

desk but no computer. She has a phone but shares it with 48 other people. All the while she's trying to bring the public service of a small Third World African nation into the 20th century.

And strangely enough, she likes it, at least most of the time.

It would be hard not to get discouraged in Benin, which this weekend will enjoy a rare moment of attention on the international stage.

Starting Saturday, the main city of Cotonou will play host to the franco-phone summit, a three-day meeting of countries and provinces that share the French language.

Prime Minister Jean Chrétien will represent Canada. Premier Frank McKenna will be on hand for New Brunswick, Deputy Premier Bernard Landry for Quebec.

Benin is one of the those countries that few people have ever heard of and fewer will visit. As a French colony it

was known as Dahomey. After independence in 1960 it fell into the usual African pattern of coups, chaos and a Marxist-style command economy.

It made a remarkable and peaceful transition from military rule to democracy in the late 1980s. Nicephore Soglo, a former World Bank economist, was elected president and the economy has been growing ever since.

Yet Benin remains much as it always was — largely rural, agricultural, poor and illiterate. Montsion describes it as a feudal society.

Winding up in Benin was never part of Montsion's career plan.

The native of Hull, spent 16 years with the federal public service before moving to Hydro Quebec in 1986 as vice-president for auditing.

By coincidence, one of the people training in her department was Soglo's son. He was so impressed with Montsion that he recommended to his father

that she come to Benin to help the country's fledgling public service.

Soglo agreed, and contacted former Quebec premier Robert Bourassa. He agreed, too, and in early 1994 Montsion arrived in Cotonou as a special adviser on leave from Hydro Quebec.

Her job: to take Soglo's office and make it a modern, efficient operation. In Canadian terms this would be the equivalent of restructuring the Prime Minister's Office plus the Privy Council Office. This would be no easy task in a developed country. In a developing country it's like the labors of Hercules.

Progress has been agonizingly slow and even today it's a constant struggle.

She wonders how much longer she will stay. Her contract expires in six months and it might be renewed if certain things fall into place. But if not, no one will ever accuse her of not trying.

Southern News

THE OTTAWA  
**Citizen**

DEC. 01 1995