The West African state of Benin is encouraging women from all spheres of society, including those who are unemployed, to participate more directly in activities that will help the country's development.

The Association of Beninese Women for Development (AFBD) first saw the light of day in January 1990. Officially recognized and with around 500 fully registered and active members, it is a federation of many women's groups and covers the entire national territory. Its ranks include a wide variety of professions: physicians, pharmacists, lawyers, civil servants, engineers, economists, technicians, teachers, midwives and nurses, pensioners, businesswomen, housewives and unemployed women.

The AFBD has a General Assembly and an 11-member Executive Board charged with carrying out all decisions emerging from the General Assembly. It also has several technical commissions designed to promote new ideas and programmes in the various fields of activity. But perhaps the most important features are the "cells" - decentralized and self-supporting organizations of women living in town suburbs and villages - and the "cell-groups," which are extensions of the cells and operate as cooperatives for women engaged in the marketing and processing of farm produce.

The Association's principal objective was to encourage more women to participate more intensively in the process of democratization. Next, it sought to bring all the women together to promote the country's economic development through income-generating activities. These would not only help them to raise their families' standard of living but also enable them to make savings so as to cope better with any health problems that might arise.

With these objectives in mind, many cooperative groups have benefited from the support of the AFBD network to improve the quality and value of their produce. For example, the Association has set up two cooperative projects to encourage young unemployed people to raise pigs, and it is overseeing a women's cooperative which is undertaking market gardening on the country's Atlantic coast. To support such activities and give the women easier access to credits, a savings cooperative called Coopec-Fraternity was started two years ago.

So that Beninese women can derive greater benefit from their economic activities and thus promote development, some 30 members of the AFBD have received training to train others in the running of microprojects; this is part of a project aimed at financing health through small, economically viable projects initiated by women and unemployed young people.

This year and next year, the AFBD programme envisages 200 microprojects which are being put into effect by women and the young unemployed. These projects will help women to involve themselves actively in the productive sector and to make savings that will ensure the financing of their families' health through the creation of mutual funds for social welfare.

Dr Véronique Lawson is the Minister of Health of Benin and President of the Association of Beninese Women for Development (AFBD), B.P. 04-1497, Cotonou, Benin.