



Briefing Note
On
the Sahel and West Africa Club/OECD
March 2004

West Africa: some background

In order to come to grips with the role and functioning of the Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC), it is important to have a good understanding of West Africa and to be somewhat familiar with the Club Secretariat's reading of the region.

West Africa and the rest of the world

First, some facts on the region itself. West Africa is composed of 17 countries stretching from Cape Verde in the western part of the continent to Chad in the east. They include fifteen countries that are members of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) plus Mauritania and Chad. Cameroon is also taken into account given its important role in the Lake Chad Basin. The region covers a surface area of 7,800,000 km², equivalent to 21 times the surface area of Japan, 2.5 times that of the European Union and approximately 85% and 86% respectively of Canada and the United States. There are approximately 290 million inhabitants, representing approximately 40% of the population of sub-Saharan Africa, 80% of the population of the European Union, roughly equivalent to that of the United States, 2.2 times that of Japan and 9 times the population of Canada. The GDP per capita is in the order of \$US 350/year, about 126 times lower than that of Japan, 90 times lower than that of the United States, 76 times lower than that of the European Union and 65 times lower than that of Canada.

Regional transformation dynamics

In the early 1990s, the Long-Term Development Perspective Studies carried out by the Sahel Club showed that West Africa has been doubly jolted since the 1960s. First, internally, the region itself has experienced unprecedented demographic growth. Second, externally, West Africa has been exposed to a rapidly changing world economy and propelled into the global world.

Although population growth in West Africa stagnated until the end of the 19th century, the region's population went from 40 million inhabitants in 1930 to 85 million in 1960 and then to 290 million in 2003. The significant proportion of youth less than 20 years old – totalling more than 50% of the population – highlights the challenges to be addressed, notably in terms of employment and migratory movements to urban areas, within the region and towards developed countries. Unprecedented urbanisation has recently been added to the equation. Over the past 30 years, the region has seen an increase in its urbanisation rate equivalent to what cities in developed countries have experienced over a period of two hundred years. For example, the population of Nouakchott, approximately 40,000 inhabitants in 1973, has now reached almost 800,000 inhabitants.

The second major shock occurred when West African countries had to position themselves in relation to international competition and globalisation. This has been all the more difficult because, with the exception

of Nigeria, these countries do not have large domestic markets and have yet to reap sustainable benefits from economies of scale within the framework of increased exchanges between local, national and regional levels.

The SWAC's reading of West Africa

While recognising problems and challenges – both past and present – facing West Africa, the SWAC's reading of the situation is focussed on the major transformations and potentials of this part of the world. Even if bad news usually makes the headlines, the positive dynamics of change and evolution must not be given a secondary importance.

With respect to positive dynamics, it would have been difficult to imagine in 1973 that countries like Niger, Mali and Burkina Faso would register a cereal surplus 30 years later - living proof that the region has gone through significant agricultural transformations. With regard to the challenges, the region has had problems improving competitiveness in part because of the limited size of the internal markets in each country, except for Nigeria, but also because it has yet to benefit from economies of scale that an increase level of regional trade could help generate. Furthermore, the significant population increase since 1960 has resulted in important migrations within and outside the region as well as in tremendous pressures on already precarious socio-economic infrastructure. The problems in the region are further compounded by governance issues, tensions resulting from rapid transformations in societies and conflicts. In this context, the internal conflicts that have erupted in the region can be attributed, to a large extent, to the tensions created by the demographic and socio-economic transformations that the region and its various communities have gone through over the years.

The changes that have occurred over the last thirty years would have required an important first wave of socio-economic investment to redress the initial situation and a second more significant wave to address the basic needs of a population in rapid expansion. In reality, the region has not benefited from any significant amount of foreign direct investment, its share of world trade is still extremely low, and despite many efforts to cancel public debt, it has remained in many countries disproportionate to their reimbursement capacity. In addition, the region has neither received a level of ODA commensurate with the magnitude of its needs nor has it been able to mobilise internal savings. Given the very low level of financial resources mobilised for the region in comparison to the needs derived in a large measure from the high population growth rate, it is not surprising that most of the countries in the region will not be able to reach, on a per capita basis, the Millennium Development Goals. Commitment and determination will be required from all development players to correct the current situation.

The Sahel and West Africa Club (SWAC)

Role and functioning

The Sahel Club was created in 1976 by a group of leaders from the Sahel and the OECD. At that time, it was feared that the international community's official aid to the Sahel region in response to the devastating droughts would taper off. The SWAC is led by a Secretariat which is attached to the OECD. The Secretariat is comprised of a small team of experts based in Paris. It benefits from the support of a network of local correspondents in West Africa and experts of diverse origins and backgrounds. Its programmes are financed by voluntary contributions from a large number of OECD countries and are subject to approval by a Strategy and Policy Group (SPG) composed of representatives from contributing countries and from the main West African partner institutions and networks.

The Club is not a funding agency. Over the years, its primary role has been to support the efforts of

Africans themselves vis-à-vis the international community to highlight the challenges and to advocate the future prospects of each country in the region and of the region as a whole. The Club is an informal structure promoting reflections without borders and alerting the international community on the region's challenges and potentialities. It is aimed at facilitating informed debates to support decisions and actions – both within and outside of the region – for a better future for West Africa. The Club aims to favour open and direct exchanges – South-South and North-South – concerning issues as crucial as the reading of past and future determinants of the region anchored in an in-depth knowledge of the realities on the ground; modes of governance; conflict dynamics; transformation of the rural environment; local development and the regional integration process; improvement of competitiveness and mobilisation of required public and private resources both within and outside the region; and the possible futures for West Africa within the framework of new partnerships.

Methodology and results

To ensure informed debates on the region's various issues and future prospects, the Club's approach aims to support the Africans themselves to analyse priority areas that are of critical importance for the region's future development. The idea is to anchor the strategic debates in an in-depth knowledge of the concrete realities on the ground. The main products of the Club include formal and informal partnerships – with the same strategic approach as NEPAD – on subjects of vital interest for the future of the region, analyses of specific subjects, publications, advocacy initiatives, informal and formal debates within the framework of events organised by the Club and decisions made by development actors irrespective of their origin.

On numerous occasions since its creation, the Club has adjusted itself to changing realities with a view to remain both relevant and effective. Since 2001, for example, the Club opened up to all of West Africa becoming the Sahel and West Africa Club; it encouraged African partners to participate more actively in its different initiatives; it refined its conceptual and methodological approach, basing it more on a medium and long-term vision taking into account spatial dynamics and the complementarity between local, national and regional levels; it reinforced and broadened its partnership with an increasing number of actors with stakes in the region and, of course, with other members of the "Development Cluster" created last year within the OECD.

Areas of concentration

As an informal forum for analysis, informed debates and action, the SWAC Secretariat will continue to support the efforts of West Africans in defining medium and long-term development strategies for the region and in advocating and promoting their implementation. The Club will encourage and facilitate analyses, exchanges of views and decisions, both South-South and North-South, in four main areas in which it will concentrate its efforts: medium and long term development perspectives of the region and new partnerships; agricultural transformation and sustainable development; local development and regional integration; and governance, conflict dynamics, peace and security.

A few examples

West and Central Africa produce nearly a million tons of cotton annually which made up 17% of world exports in 2002 against 4% in 1980. In Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali, Chad and Togo, cotton represents from 5-10% of GDP and approximately 30% of total exports. This shows that cotton production has a direct and indirect impact on more than 10 million people in the region. Accordingly, it is not surprising that the SWAC organised a special event in Paris in September 2003 on cotton at the request of West African actors (producer organisations, West African representatives and international NGOs based in the region) just before the ministerial meeting of the World Trade Organisation in Cancun. The main objectives of this

event were to increase awareness among OECD Member countries of the vital importance of cotton in the region; to favour an exchange of views on the proposal to be negotiated on cotton submitted to the WTO by four West African countries; to create a forum of exchanges on regional prospects concerning cotton; to increase awareness within the OECD; among Member countries' civil society; and the media; of the stakes involved in the negotiations underway. The Club played the role of facilitator.

This role is currently pursued in connection with the next meeting organised by the WTO at the end of March in Cotonou, bringing together regional and international organisations, representatives of African governments and representatives of cotton-producing countries outside Africa. At this meeting, the Club will also represent the OECD. The idea is to facilitate continuous and informed dialogue on all issues linked to cotton production. This subject constitutes an important element of the SWAC's 2004 work plan in light of the strategic importance of the cotton dossier for the outcome of the current international trade negotiations (Doha Round).

The regional integration process in West Africa is recognised as essential in a region characterised by a vast geographical area, population and migration dynamics, the fragmentary nature of its states and national economies. The creation of a real regional market is an essential development goal which will stimulate growth and peace to the benefit of the entire regional population. Since 2002, the SWAC has been working on this complex dossier. First, it organised an innovative conference in Accra during which the need to narrowly link local initiatives and intergovernmental cooperation was emphasised. Since then, the SWAC Secretariat, in collaboration with regional structures and governments, supports field experiments conducted over cross-border areas, leads a network on local-level contribution to the process of regional integration and lends support to ECOWAS in establishing the necessary link between integration "from the bottom" and integration "from the top". A workshop which will bring together for the first time local and regional actors will be organised in collaboration with ECOWAS before the end of the year.

In 2003, the SWAC Secretariat initiated a work programme on violent conflicts and structural stability in West Africa. The programme helped identify the regional dimensions of conflict and the resulting instability. The programme was implemented in collaboration with the major West African actors and their international partners. An international seminar on conflicts and development policy in Mano River Countries and Côte d'Ivoire, initiated by the French cooperation, constituted a strong point of the programme. The event allowed participants to present their analyses and debate regional issues such as stabilisation and reconstruction, and examine the role of ECOWAS in such matters. During 2003, in the context of its regional approach, the Secretariat also studied and reflected on the following subjects: involuntary migration; population dynamics and the reconstruction process; economic consequences of conflicts; security; and maintenance of basic services. This work has allowed the Secretariat to lay down the foundations for its support for actions in favour of conflict resolution, peace-keeping and security in the region.

In this context, at the end of February 2004 the SWAC Secretariat organised a meeting of the members of the *Club de Veille Stratégique pour la Paix en Afrique de l'Ouest*. The *Club de Veille* is an informal structure created in 2003 in Bamako by West African personalities from civil society who wished to play an active role in favour of peace and security in the region. At the recent meeting in Dakar, the *Club de Veille* submitted a work programme for the next few years which will be supported by the SWAC. This programme specifically provides for regular updates on the state of West African conflicts; a regional forum organised on a regular basis bringing together representatives from political parties, media and civil society within the region; a regional forum on the issue of Women and Peace in the region supplemented by field visits, as appropriate; and finally a forum allowing local officials to discuss their role and contribution towards peace and security in their respective country and in the region as a whole.

In partnership with other institutions, and in collaboration with researchers and development actors directly involved, the SWAC Secretariat will undertake, as of next year, the publication of a document on the medium and long term development perspectives of the region. This initiative will help put together the results from various analyses, publications, debates and decisions on the major challenges and future prospects of the region stemming from direct initiatives taken by the SWAC Secretariat or within the framework of the partnership and network approach that it has adopted.

* * *