

ALAIN ANTIL

Head of IFRI's Sub-Saharan Africa program

Sub-Saharan Africa: Implosion or takeoff?

50 years after the Independence, Sub-Saharan Africa still suffers from numerous structural problems both on economic and governance issues. In overall international rankings, most African countries appear in the unflattering categories (LDCs – Less Developed Countries – / HIPC – Highly Indebted Poor Countries -). In general, a majority of African countries are considered as weak or failed (Somalia). Although there are fewer and, almost importantly, less bloody wars than in the past, societies in many African countries still suffer from heightened internal tension sometimes leading to violent crises.

Sub-Saharan economies have not yet reached, “take-off”, as described by Rostow at the moment of Independence. Indeed, except two or three countries in the region, industrialization remains a marginal activity within African economies. These economies are mostly structured around the exporting of 2 or 3 small-scale products and their role is limited, in International Division of Labor’s theoretical frame (IDL), in providing mineral, energy and local raw materials to other economies, which use them in manufacturing for larger capital gains. Nigeria is an example that exemplifies this. Petrol alone represents almost 95% of Nigerian exports (a country which, paradoxically, imports a massive amount of refined petrol). Numerous other African economies are allowance economies, which depend on the external prices of few natural resources they export. When products prices are up, GDP is up, when the same products prices are down, it leads to a reduced GDP and State budget problems.

Concerning the governance issue, speakers agree to emphasize a positive evolution, although numerous countries are still a long way from international standards. However, there is the need to emphasize that economic progress does not automatically create “public goods” and has little impact on the living conditions for most of the Sub Saharan population. Corruption is certainly not exclusive to Africa and should not be the only method for analyzing governance, however the issue of long-running African presidents (including their close associates, or their “systems”), in comparison to leaders on other continents, halts economic growth and rapid progress. African countries rarely exhibit regular changes in leadership, at least linked to successful election processes.

Some speakers wanted to put these points in perspective and reiterate that if we focus too much on “situations”, we may be overlooking the importance of “dynamics”. And yet, current dynamics on the continent prove another Africa is being born. On economics in particular, many sectors are going to take a bigger stake. Telecommunications, food processing industries connected to increased agricultural performance or the building industry are and will be, with extractive industries, the driving force behind economic growth of the future.

Moreover, unlike extractive industries, entirely reliant on exports, these new sectors have and will have direct and visible effects on quality of life of African populations. Economic change is more pronounced because some investment funds have started to show an interest in countries south of the Sahara. For the first time, African funds, which are usually invested or “deposited” outside the continent, are being invested in the region. It is probably an early warning sign of an economic integration. Until now, Sub-Saharan Africa has been the region in the world that conducts the least business with itself (less than 5%, compared with 60% for EU countries). Thus, economic growth has increased in the last decade; countries’ debts have been reduced. One of the last things hindering faster economic expansion remains the scarcity of credit. Once we get around this obstacle, GDP should increase even more rapidly.

One of the important dynamics is, of course, the demographic revolution that affects the continent. The Sub-Saharan population will double by 2050. This revolution carries both risks and advantages. In the next four decades, African societies will change drastically, massive geographical mobility is expected, and Africans will become predominantly urban. This transformation will lead to structural economic changes but also changes in identity. Land issue, which former colonial powers are partly responsible for, in particular in former British colonies, will be one of the main factors in the reconstruction of societies.

With larger communities and rare access to land, tensions, such as the ones seen in Côte d'Ivoire in recent years, should be expected and autochthony movements will increase ("we were the first ones who lived in this region, so we have priority over land"). Violence may or may not be used. In urban areas, "uprooted" masses will join under-developed neighborhoods where they will weave new social networks. This demographic revolution will also carry many positive changes: an important active population, trained better and with a revived spirit.

Others stakes, such as global warming and its predictable consequences (foreseeable disappearance of some littoral cities, "climate refugees" displacements) should also be expected.

All these changes are, in fact, challenges for political management in African societies. The issues highlighted above can only be managed if African states rebuild themselves. Governance and development issues are often poorly approached. For a long time, African partner states wanted to employ economic and political molds created elsewhere or wanted to implement formulas which worked in others continents at different periods of time. This imported vision of African societies (hence speaking of what they should be and not what they are), which is often assimilated by the African elite, has to now be replaced by the development of real governance and development African models. Speaking of "African models" does not mean that the continent will shut itself off from the rest of the world while idealizing pre-colonial history, but that the elite will search for or be inspired by models developed elsewhere and will re-interpret them in their own ways and rhythm.