

LOUISE MUSHIKIWABO

Secretary-General of the International Organisation of La Francophonie

Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Chairman of Ifri and the WPC

Louise Mushikiwabo has been Secretary-General of the Organization for three years now. That has gone incredibly quickly. Together, we have decided to have a conversation whose starting point is the idea that the *Organisation de la Francophonie* is a political organization or one that has, in any case, a genuine political dimension.

Of course, the French language, the French way of speaking, and I want to say French ways of speaking, are a very important aspect of this organization, but it is not strictly speaking a “cultural” organization. While this is somewhat the case, it is also, if I may say so, something rather more than this.

Louise, we can perhaps start with this topic – and since we use the familiar “*tu*” form when speaking in private, we will do the same in public. That is, you can tell us how you view the role of the organization after these three years, how you would like to see it develop under your stewardship, and later on with your successors.

Louise Mushikiwabo

Thank you very much, Thierry. I am happy to be here. I can see many familiar faces.

The story of La Francophonie is indeed a beautiful one. It is the story of the grand vision of those people colonized by France who decided to wrest a precious instrument from this awful experience: the French language, which brought them together and gave them a means of international communication. They decided to use French as a means of cooperation between themselves. Then they turned to other nations, which joined them.

In the beginning, these were three African men and one Cambodian: Leopold Sédar Senghor, the President of Senegal; Hamani Diori, the President of Niger; Habib Bourguiba, the President of Tunisia; and King Norodom Sihanouk, who said to themselves: “At long last, we are going to take this language and use it as the glue that binds us to other nations.”

Initially, La Francophonie was effectively a cultural cooperation agency. Very quickly, however, over the years, it changed. I would say that it improved; it became something much more significant. La Francophonie was conceived in 1970, in Niamey, on the banks of the River Niger. The idea at the time was to continue to explore ways of bringing people together.

I say it is a beautiful story because today, it is an organization that makes sense. As we have seen during this health crisis, we are living in a world where we have no choice but to

cooperate. We are living in an interdependent world. I think everything depends on the way we handle this interdependence.

I am the fourth person to lead this organization after Boutros Boutros-Ghali, Abdou Diouf and Michaëlle Jean. So: an Egyptian, a Senegalese, a Canadian, and me – a Rwandan. My country, which currently has four official languages, was among the 21 members who signed the Charter of La Francophonie in Niamey.

The evolution in the Francophone world is both linguistic and, increasingly, political. I was elected in 2018, in Yerevan in Armenia, with a mandate to re-think and revitalize the Organization in the current climate.

So how do I imagine growing this organization, increasing its international political influence, and focusing its efforts? La Francophonie is grounded in culture and cooperation. This is an organization that has spread itself widely, and which has done many good things during its fifty years of existence, but which could never stay focused on a narrow range of issues.

Since 2019, we have tried to tighten the scope of our activity. The multilateral world is changing. This is a time for reflection and change, and I think that an organization such as ours is undergoing the same process.

Personally, I think that La Francophonie has some fundamental values such as respect for rights, gender equality – a hugely important issue for me personally – and also digital technology, which is indispensable these days. Above all, however, our organization should look increasingly towards young people.

Currently, our members include 88 states and governments. Of the Organization's 54 full members, 32 – more than half – are African countries, of which three associate members are of non-Francophone origin (Ghana, Mozambique, and Gambia). So there is a large African majority, to which we can add 29 countries and 19 member countries from the European Union. For me, if I can say it like this, our organization packs quite a punch.

This means we need to be able to focus on our action areas, to be present where we are really needed, where the world is heading, and above all achieve results on the ground. You know that in the world of multilateral organizations we can spend five or six years going to conferences, holding discussions and organizing summits. Today, this is at odds with the expectations and requirements of our citizens.

Once again, this is an extremely youthful population. For most of our Southern member countries, in particular in Africa, up to 70% of their populations are under 25. So the Organization has to adapt to this demographic. The African population is also the one that supports the French language. According to the forecast of the French Language Observatory, which works with our Organization in Paris, the number of French speakers will increase. But only on condition that this fast-moving African population is accompanied by the increased presence of the French language. My personal motto as Secretary-General for La Francophonie is to genuinely reverse the decline in the use of French.

I am not in favor of a "hegemonic" Francophonie. I think that today, 51 years after this organization was created, we are part of a much more linguistically diverse world. That is just

the reality. We live in a world that requires language organizations to be able to integrate with other organizations, with much greater flexibility.

And to answer the last part of the question: I hope that those who succeed me in managing this great organization will continue down this path of tighter focus and less dispersion.

Thierry de Montbrial

Unfortunately, everything here is on the clock. I am going to ask you a question that is intentionally provocative, as this is not the place for *langue de bois*. Also, I have never known how to translate “*langue de bois*” into English. I think it is untranslatable. How do you say it? It does not exist.

Louise Mushikiwabo

Already, there is no *langue de bois* in English, in the Anglo-Saxon world.

Thierry de Montbrial

There is no *langue de bois* in the Anglo-Saxon world. Exactly. That is my question. We speak a lot, in these frankly political times, about AUKUS which is an alliance between the United States, Australia, and Great Britain. In reality, the French would say “Anglo-Saxon” – and we say rather “Anglo-American”, which is the most proper term.

And there it is, my slightly loaded question. Is there, within the concept of La Francophonie, in political terms, the idea that the Anglo-American world has a stand-alone existence, as AUKUS may lead us to think?

Louise Mushikiwabo

It is not so much a loaded question. More a complicated one. Does this world exist? Yes and no. You are speaking about three countries, perhaps country-continent, like the United States – a country I know well having lived there for a long time.

Increasingly, I think that the concept of linked sovereign countries, the traditional grouping of countries, will not be a function of language. With AUKUS, the focus is much more geopolitical than linguistic. I also have the impression – I am keeping a close eye on everything that happens in the world during this health crisis that caught us all off guard – that country groupings will increasingly be by mutual interest or by theme, rather than by geographical location or even the geopolitical groupings we see presently, as with the G7 or the United Nations itself. Increasingly, we will see nations joining forces over a specific issue. I was going to say over terrorism; but this is a global phenomenon.

It also seems to me that countries will increasingly take a short-term stance on a single issue, then switch alliance, move onto another issue, and perhaps also change the members of these groups.

Thierry de Montbrial

Sadly, we do not have time to explore this idea in more depth. The problem is that if one country wants to put pressure on another, then inter-functionality comes into play. Inevitably, there are influences. There is also the point we were discussing this morning regarding trade, in particular for the gas market, for example. As things stand, Russian pressures in this area can also be explained by other things. It is a genuine point of debate.

Louise Mushikiwabo

Take a look around. We are in this part of the world. We are in the Gulf. If we look at the Arab world, not even three years ago, we could not have imagined the alliances, the misalliances, and the changes currently taking place in the world concerning relations with Israel, for example. Having held the position of Minister of Foreign Affairs for ten years, I know that air traffic clearance for any country in that region is one of the most stressful aspects of our travels here.

It is not only Africans. The same goes for the rest of the world. We have one passport when we enter Israel, and another passport when we enter some other countries in the region. And, well, it is no longer even the case. For me, the countries in that region, just through observation and with no particular expertise, are focused on security – and security concerns will dictate their relations. Security will dictate new alliances which, sometimes, may even be short-lived.

The same applies for Africa. Today, my own country, Rwanda, which is in Eastern Central Africa, is involved in fighting terrorism in Mozambique. Rwanda and Mozambique have enjoyed cordial, good relations for a very long time, but not much more. The fact that Mozambique went to Rwanda to discuss the contribution of Rwandan troops to the security problem in Mozambique – this is an aspect of this world that comes together and then unravels, and which is not necessarily limited.

Mozambique is a member country of the Southern African Development Community (SADC). Rwanda is a member of the Central and East African Communities. This alliance that it so crucial today – who could have imagined it five years ago? And I can apply the same to Asian countries. For those of us involved in international relations, this is an extremely interesting world.

But we have to be prepared. There is a type of strategic disorder, if I can say it this way, which we should make the most of to push forward our ideas and beliefs. This may be the environment, young people, gender equality – it can be anything we want. But it is a very interesting world because we can change the way we do things; we can go a bit further than we would at home.

At the same time, we have seen with this health crisis that sovereign states are no longer capable of handling certain global challenges alone. It is impossible. Multiple players need to be involved. But that does not mean that things will stay this way for twenty years. It may only be for two years. This is a highly fluid world.