

## ROMUALD WADAGNI

### Senior Minister in charge of Economy and Finance of Benin

I think we are right to worry about what is happening in the Sahel. We will see that separating security and the economy makes no sense because everything is related. Over the 2010-2020 period, the Sahel countries launched a growth and poverty reduction process, although in different degrees. During that period, eight UEMOA countries grew by 7% or more for seven consecutive years. The region is extremely poor, with huge social and economic gaps between big cities and the countryside. These countries began a growth and poverty reduction process. In 2020, Covid hit, slowing down the momentum. The outbreak of global crises only made matters worse.

Consider climate change, which we have been talking about for years. Conditions in the Sahel countries make the impact worse there. In the last three years, climate change and drought have sent Niger's agricultural output plummeting. Given their geographical location, these countries are bearing the full brunt of climate change. They are also extremely poor, and there is an enormous gap between the haves and the have-nots, which can fuel social tensions. The Libyan crisis triggered an overflow of terrorist attacks towards the Sahel and now the South. The Sahel countries now have to deal with terrorist groups on their soil. They seem to accumulate all the problems in the world: climate change, terrorism, lack of basic infrastructure, education, water, you name it, they have it because they are severely underdeveloped.

The momentum I mentioned during the 2010-2020 period, when countries began making efforts, spurred basic development but came to a halt with Covid. We think it will resume, but with the climate and security challenges the circumstances are becoming complicated. Nevertheless, solutions exist. Nothing is lost, resources can be developed, and initiatives can be put on the table to help these countries succeed. However, they will not be able to act alone.

### **Thierry de Montbrial, Founder and Executive Chairman of Ifri and the WPC**

Thank you very much, that is an excellent starting point. [...]

After these explanations I want to push you a bit because you have been thinking primarily in economic terms. You have extensive international experience. You know that many analysts and critics focus on organizational inefficiency, corruption and underperforming elites everywhere, not only in your countries. The elites are highly criticized, which provides fertile ground for the spread of jihadist and revolutionary ideologies. I remind you that landlocked countries are not the only ones under threat: the risk of jihadist terrorism is thought to be spreading to the Gulf of Guinea countries. Very important countries, which I do not need to mention, are also under threat. This is a stark reality. Before giving the floor to two speakers with more security experience, I would like you to respond to what I have said.

**Romuald Wadagni**

I did not want to add an aspect previously, which has to do with your question. I held back because I felt I was being too negative and borderline hopeless about the region. Many African countries have two basic problems: governance and a low level of training. We have talked about the deteriorating security situation and climate change, but all the social movements and coups in the area, from Guinea to Mali, engender another form of insecurity. They occur in a vacuum of stable governance and institutions capable of enforcing the law. You are right, poor governance and lack of training are at the root of the problem. Take Benin. Mr. Tchibozo said that a question remains open: where to begin?

In 2016, I was responsible for Benin's budget. With the government, we decided to earmark some of the budget to alleviate extreme poverty and provide people with access to potable water and microfinance. The rest focused on the formation of human capital. We decided to provide 70% of our young people with technical and professional training. Universities are ill-equipped and graduates cannot find jobs, another factor that fosters an environment for poor governance. So we focused our efforts on laws and texts to have good governance and on the formation of human capital: training young people. With well-trained, well-educated young people who can use their hands, you create the conditions for better governance and less corruption. Time will tell whether we are doing the right thing. In any case, in 2021 our growth rate was 7.2%. This year, the World Bank announced a 2.2% inflation rate for Benin, one of the lowest in Africa. These results show that we are on the right track.

According to Benin's constitution, nobody can be president for more than two consecutive terms. We are putting brakes on constitutional amendments. This may be disputable, but it is the choice we made. We have drafted laws on key sectors such as health and taxes because we cannot accept trade unions blocking healthcare or strikes lasting more than 10 days a year in this sector. We were accused of being too harsh. But now people from the sub-region come to Benin for treatment. In the last three years, when there were no strikes, our healthcare facilities worked. We passed a law stipulating that a civil servant working in healthcare must spend a minimum of hours treating people. Doctors working for the state are so poorly paid that they leave the public sector and start their own practices. People cannot receive the care they need in these circumstances. The practice is now forbidden; doctors hired by the state must work in the public sector. They must go out into rural areas and care for people in the countryside. These laws contribute to better governance. A set of approaches is necessary to settle questions of governance. The example must come from the top and trickle-down sector by sector to assure us that people are doing their jobs and facilities are working. The laws must be clear and simplified and those who govern must set an example.

I think the key to success is training. That is what we are focusing on. If young people are not trained, anybody can offer them money. They will listen to unorthodox organizations and enlist in groups seeking to destabilize states. The state must set an example. We must have clear constitutions and clear laws adapted to the reality of each country. We are not saying that these laws must be the rule everywhere. But considering the context, in Benin they are useful and allow governance and youth training issues to be settled.