

Relatively resilient

Crises and potential threats tend to dominate the European view of West and Central Africa. However severe the problems in the world's poorest region may be, the strong progress made in West African countries in recent years is just as worthy of attention. The democracies in this part of Africa are proving remarkably stable despite the adverse conditions they face.

From a European standpoint, there are two major problems in West and Central Africa: the actual or anticipated threat of migration from the world's poorest region, and militant Islamism, which is thriving primarily in Mali (and the Sahel as a whole) and Nigeria. This view does not take stock of the number of positive developments that have been underway since 1990. For one, the percentage of people living in absolute poverty has fallen significantly and per capita incomes have doubled. Women's participation and educational attainment levels are also improving. The number of deaths as a result of war and violent regime change have decreased, while elections are increasingly the means by which access to power is gained. The child mortality rate has been halved, and life expectancies have risen from below 50 to over 60 years of age, though the population growth associated with such statistics is a concern, as it could increase migratory pressures. These improvements are significant, of course, but certainly not enough. But the fact that the average regional scores for the quality of democracy, economic development and governance remained stable during the BTI 2020 survey period is encouraging. And, finally, the democracies of the region have so far proven to be relatively resilient.

This rendering of the region, which is painted in broad strokes, glosses over the stark contrasts found between its two subregions, West Africa and Central Africa. In terms of the quality of democracy, West Africa has achieved an average score that is on par with that recorded in Latin America, whereas in Central Africa, instability levels and the extent of repression exceed the regional average observed in North Africa and the Middle East. In West Africa, only Mauritania and Togo count as authoritarian states. In Central Africa, however, hard-line dictatorships or failing states continue to dominate. In both economic and social matters, massive structural challenges – such as widespread poverty, low education levels, high conflict intensity or weak statehood – persist. Indeed, this part of Africa has the world's lowest level of development.

All seven Central African countries included in the BTI, with the exception of Gabon, also perform much worse in terms of governance than do their 15 West African counterparts, of which only Mauritania and Nigeria show poor governance. In Central Africa, governments are often unwilling to target a liberal democracy and a socially inclusive market economy. Efficiency is a problem in nearly all the region's countries. Most governments tend to waste resources, take action without coordinating with others, and fail at battling corruption. With the exceptions of Benin, Gambia, Ghana, Senegal and – to some extent – Liberia, the capacity for consensus-building is weak. In many cases, governments fail not only to prevent conflicts from escalating, but actually seek to fuel tensions. Conflicts in the region run mostly along ethnic or regional lines, and are prone to escalation when linked to religious differences and economic inequalities.

Ghana features the most advanced political and economic transformation in the region, and its levels of participation and integration are also impressive in global comparison. The Senegalese government has the best regional governance, and stands out for its steering capability and willingness to cooperate with regional and international institutions and actors. Benin also receives high transformation scores again, particularly with regard to the stability of democratic institutions and consensus-building. However, it should be noted that procedural obstacles in the runup to parliamentary elections of April 2019 effectively excluded opposition parties from participating – though this took place outside of the period under review and is therefore not included in this year's BTI assessment. On the opposite end of the transformation scale, we find the Democratic Republic of Congo and the Central African Republic, both of which are failing states, as well as Equatorial Guinea and Chad, which are subject to extremely repressive dictatorships.

In this year's edition, the BTI features four countries that had previously been excluded due to their small populations: Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Gambia and Guinea-Bissau. Because the four countries fit relatively evenly into the distribution, their inclusion has had little impact on regional averages. Since its rather bumpy but democratic transfer of power in 2017, which brought an end to more than 20 years of dictatorship, Gambia is a beacon of hope, even if it is still one of the poorest countries in the region. Many observers regard Guinea-Bissau as a so-called narco state plagued by political instability and poverty. Following relatively democratic elections in 2014, the country is currently classified as a defective democracy. Equatorial Guinea and Gabon are classic "rentier states" with considerable oil-based export revenues.

Political transformation

Poor but democratic

In the last 10 years, West Africa has witnessed six successful (re-)democratizations – more than any other subregion of the BTI. In Central Africa, hard-line autocracies still dominate. This includes several political dinosaurs who have been able to maintain their grip on power.

In the last 10 years, no region in the world has democratized as much as West Africa, where Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Gambia, Guinea, Niger and Nigeria have all undergone a (re-)democratization. However, four of the subregion's 13 democracies are classified by the BTI 2020 as highly defective due to fragile state stability (Mali, Nigeria), major deficits in the rule of law (Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Mali), and a lack of political and social integration (Nigeria). West African democracies therefore remain susceptible to abrupt regressions. Nonetheless, autocracies, such as Mauritania and Togo, are now an exception. By contrast, the dynastic republic of Gabon – as a moderate autocracy – stands out among the hard-line dictatorships and failing states of Central Africa.

Benin, Ghana and Senegal are also worth noting for the quality of elections held in each; since the early 1990s, democratically legitimized transfers of power have taken place in each of these states. In Ghana, incumbents have even been voted out of office twice before the end of their two-term limit, most recently in December 2016. Presidents in Benin and Senegal have not sought to challenge term limits. Respect for term limits was also demonstrated recently in Sierra Leone, where Ernest Bai Koroma, after two terms in office, was replaced by opposition leader Julius Maada Bio, who won the 2018 elections. In Liberia, too, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf – the first woman in the region to be elected head of state – acted in line with the constitution by stepping down after her second term in office. The elections held in 2018 were won by former world footballer George Weah. In Gambia, under international pressure exerted in particular by the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) under Senegal's leadership, Yahya Jammeh's authoritarian rule was brought to an end in 2017 and the presidency was transferred to the officially elected Adama Barrow.

The political breakthrough in Burkina Faso, which had already undergone democratic transformation at the end of 2015, was also strongly supported by regional institutions, such as ECOWAS and the African Union. Nonetheless, the country remains politically fragile and is a highly defective democracy in which domestic politics are increasingly subject to turmoil associated with growing Islamism in the Sahel. This kind of political instability is also present in Mali and Nigeria. Elections in Nigeria – which took place in March 2019, shortly after the end of the survey period – led to the confirmation of President Muhammadu Buhari, who had replaced his predecessor for the first time in a free election four years earlier.

Elections held in the Democratic Republic of Congo at the beginning of 2019 are also worth noting. After President Joseph Kabila had spent two years governing beyond his mandate, he finally gave in to domestic and foreign political pressure and stepped down from office. The elections that followed, however, delivered a surprise outcome: The ruling party's candidate was defeated and came in third place. The unexpected winner was Félix Tshisekedi, son of the late long-time Congolese opposition politician Étienne Tshisekedi. Polls and observers had put the candidate Martin Fayulu in the lead,

whose supporters have been long-standing and sharp opponents of the “System Kabila.” Kabila presumably chose the lesser evil after realizing that his own candidate would not prevail.

In the region’s democracies, major or external shocks can lead to backsliding almost anywhere and at any time. A lack of stateness, particularly in terms of being able to maintain control over state territory and borders, is one widespread problem that easily devolves into a crisis. Problems with the rule of law are just as widespread. Although militaries are exercising greater restraint in political matters than ever before, in many countries, the military continues to pull its strings from behind the scenes. Party systems and interest groups are often unable to operate as mediators, while the self-organizing capacities of civil society remain weak.

Even less promising is the state of affairs in the autocracies, some of which bear the characteristics of a dynasty, as is the case in Equatorial Guinea, Gabon and Togo. As in Chad and Togo, the military also plays a key behind-the-scenes role in Mauritania. Former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz surprised many with his decision to respect the constitution in the elections held in the summer of 2019 by not running again after two terms in office. However, his close confidant, General Ould Ghazouani, won the elections, an outcome characterized by the BTI country report as a “Medvedev / Putin scenario” that could involve Abdel Aziz being re-elected in 2024, in line with the constitution.

Hier einfügen: GRAFIK 1

Islamism and jihadism are potentially the largest challenges in the region. The entire Sahel, with Mali as its epicenter, is threatened. The number of attacks in Burkina Faso are growing. Nigeria, where Boko Haram poses another threat, is also characterized by a persistently high degree of violence. In both cases, these conflicts threaten to expand and spill over into other areas. Boko Haram has already expanded its activities into Cameroon, Chad and Niger.

In nearly all West African and some Central African countries, conflicts could escalate if ethnic and religious cleavages are brought together in ways that reinforce the dividing lines. Neither freedom of religion nor the separation of religion and state pose urgent problems. With the exceptions of Mauritania, Niger and Nigeria, the influence of religious dogmas on politics is rather limited in scope. Although people in much of the region are very religious, the separation of church and state often functions better here than in Western Europe. Religion is generally a problem at the non-state level, which then becomes a challenge to state cohesion, as was clearly observed in the case of Mali. It remains unclear to which extent both the spread of Islamism and the fight against terrorism in countries such as Burkina Faso, Mali and Nigeria will negatively affect their democracies.

Economic transformation

Resource addiction

To date, no West or Central African country has achieved advanced economic transformation. Structural problems are particularly severe in the rentier states, which feature a stark contrast of resource wealth and widespread poverty. Declining birth rates is also an issue that countries in the region should address.

The countries of West and Central Africa comprise the least economically and socially developed region in the world. Even in Benin, Côte d’Ivoire, Gabon, Ghana and Senegal, poverty is widespread and equal opportunities are rarely guaranteed. Alarmingly, more than three-quarters of West and Central African states have still not surpassed a “very limited” level of economic transformation.

Because it includes criteria addressing social and environmental-sustainability issues, this BTI classification captures a much more realistic state of affairs than do evaluations based solely on data such as per capita income. In countries such as Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, revenues from raw material exports may suggest a high level of development. At the same time, however, neither of these

countries feature even a remotely fair distribution of wealth or a functioning market organization. Shortcomings in Equatorial Guinea are so extensive that the country comes in third-to-last place in the regional ranking for the state of economic transformation, even though it features the highest per capita income in sub-Saharan Africa. Equatorial Guinea is followed only by the failing states of the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of Congo in this ranking.

Overall, economic performance in the region is relatively volatile. During the period under review, some countries, such as Chad, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea and Sierra Leone, thanks primarily to higher revenues deriving from the raw materials sector, were able to improve their performance. However, at the same time, this point underscores the extent to which the dependence on raw materials marks a key structural feature of most of the region's countries.

This is particularly striking among the region's several "rentier states," such as Chad, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, Nigeria and the Republic of Congo, which are all overwhelmingly dependent on oil exports. The Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, Liberia and Mauritania are also reliant on revenues from other raw material exports. Ghana and Niger may be less dependent, but nonetheless also need the revenues they derive from exports of raw materials, such as uranium or oil.

But this kind of wealth glosses over a problem: The ongoing flow of secured export earnings removes the pressure to undertake either reforms or budgetary action. As a result, structural economic problems become increasingly rigid as the strong susceptibility to price fluctuations on global markets persists. Moreover, as the so-called Dutch disease gains traction, the often high volume of capital inflows leads to increasing rates of inflation, which has a negative impact on the competitiveness of other export sectors. In addition, funds are often wasted on expensive prestige projects.

Despite the available resource wealth, by focusing on a single raw materials sector, this approach generally subjects overall economic performance to negative impacts. And it is not only the economic realm that is affected: The raw materials sector is particularly vulnerable to corruption, which in turn often weakens institutions. In addition, authoritarian leaders often use revenues to consolidate their power, and many violent conflicts are driven by disputes over the profits gained by resource revenues.

Unsurprisingly, the states that perform poorly in all categories – such as the Central African Republic, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and the Republic of Congo – are also rentier states. Equatorial Guinea and Gabon, both of which feature particularly high export revenues, are led by authoritarian regimes and have a (very) limited state of economic transformation. Equatorial Guinea represents a rather grotesque exaggeration of a rentier state. While billions flow into the pockets of the Obiang clan, poverty persists as a structural problem in the country.

Hier einfügen: GRAFIK 2

Another structural challenge facing most countries in West and Central Africa is population growth, which is increasingly viewed as a brake on economic and social development. If a population increases too rapidly for too long, even strong economic growth will not be enough to create sufficient jobs and opportunities for economic participation. On the one hand, this population growth derives from the good news that the average life expectancy has increased by 10 years since 1990 (currently at 60 years of age). On the other, however, birth rates are the second major factor in this growth and are drawing increasing attention in development policy debates. We observe a palpable trend here: The highest birth rates are found in Niger (7.2 births per woman), the Democratic Republic of Congo and Mali (6.0 each). The lowest rates are found in the economically much further advanced Gabon and Ghana, each showing an average of less than four births per woman – although these rates are still well above the global average of 2.4. High birth rates correlate negatively with the state of economic transformation, although we need to explore more carefully whether high birth rates are a factor in slowing the national economy or, vice versa, whether economic development tends to slow down birth rates. Either way, states in the region would do well to consider introducing comprehensive strategies

to address population growth. Improving women's participation in family planning and the workforce would also deliver broader benefits for societies in West and Central Africa.

Governance

On the tightwire of security and freedom

Nowhere in the world is governing as difficult as in West and Central Africa. Several societies in the region harbor the potential for ethnically driven conflicts. As the West's influence as a development partner tapers off, a further deepening of regional cooperation efforts offers the greatest hope for delivering progress.

On average, regional performance in various aspects of governance follows a similar pattern to that observed on a global scale. The inclusive aspects of governance – that is, consensus-building at the national level and cooperation at the international level – are consistently better developed than steering capability and resource efficiency. Remarkably, this discrepancy is more pronounced in West and Central Africa than it is on global average.

In other words, governments in West and Central Africa are far less able to effectively steer reform processes and implement policy priorities. We see major deficits in strategic prioritization in these countries. Only the governments of Guinea and Senegal achieve good scores for this indicator. The low rate of success in this area may be due to the fact that democracies with fragile institutions and strong patronage systems find themselves particularly susceptible to ad hoc and unreliable priority-setting. Scores for the “resource efficiency” criterion are even lower. This is in part a result of the aforementioned resource waste associated with rentier states and the chronic inefficiency of administrative structures that is found in most of the region's countries. But it is also a function of the fact that the region is falling further behind in the area of anti-corruption policy. By global standards, West and Central African governments are the least willing or able to take effective action in battling graft; no country achieves more than five points for this indicator.

Scores for the quality of governance fell most in Liberia (–0.49 points), Nigeria (–0.55) and Niger (–0.61) during the period under review. In Liberia, the transition of power from Ellen Johnson Sirleaf to George Weah was initially marked by difficulties, particularly in terms of steering capability. President Weah's team apparently had little expertise in administrative and ministerial matters. The security situation in Niger and Nigeria remains tense. Militant Islamist groups have been contained with limited success, and the focus on security puts other transformation goals at risk of being neglected.

Having to walk the tightwire while balancing security-policy challenges against development policies or efforts to promote democracy is characteristic of a region featuring many countries in which the intensity of conflict is particularly high. Civil war is raging in the Central African Republic and Nigeria. Cameroon and the two Congos are also marked by considerable violence. And Burkina Faso and Mali are grappling with the growing risk of escalating conflicts in their territories. Very few countries, such as Benin and Gabon, show a very low intensity of conflict. Both countries, like Ghana, benefit from a legacy of relatively good political governance.

In almost half of all West and Central African countries, we observe significant ethnic and regional disparities that are leveraged by elites for their political gain. In one-third of the countries examined, this is exacerbated by religious lines of conflict and, most significantly, the growing influence of militant Islamism. Should religious and ethnic differences mutually reinforce their divisions, this could prove particularly dangerous. And such is the state of affairs in Burkina Faso, the Central African Republic, Chad, Mali and Nigeria. With Christian ethnic groups settling in the south and Muslim ethnic groups in the north, the potential for escalating tensions runs across the whole of West Africa and large parts of Central Africa. An “us versus them” mentality is intensified by the perceived or actual discrimination and marginalization of specific social groups. Similar effects are driven by tensions and resentments from past violent conflicts that have not been addressed or subjected to mitigation efforts.

Conflict management is therefore of particular relevance, as it correlates fairly clearly – though not inescapably – with the intensity of conflicts. In the five countries with the highest conflict intensity (i.e., Cameroon, the Central African Republic, the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Republic of Congo, and Nigeria), the ability to manage cleavages in society is particularly fragile. Of the six governments that deliberately exacerbate cleavages, the intensity of conflict is only low in Chad. At the same time, other governments show that ethnic diversity and even the potential mixing of religious and ethnic boundaries does not necessarily result in major conflicts. In countries such as Benin and Gambia, ethnic identity is indeed politicized, but efforts are being made to ensure balanced ethnic representation. The same applies – perhaps less markedly – to Ghana and Senegal.

More broadly, the fight against Islamism must rely not only on security-driven responses, but, where possible, also involve efforts to provide non-violent political solutions. To be sure, conflict management is in many ways also a regional and international pursuit. Overall, deepening regional cooperation efforts offers the greatest opportunity for advancing transformation. The enforcement of free elections in Gambia shows that democratic norms can be more strongly advocated when embedded in a process of regional integration. Without the pressure at the hands of the regional organization ECOWAS and of Senegal, in particular, the crisis could have easily resulted in a different outcome, with Gambia's authoritarian ruler, Jammeh, remaining in office.

The landscape of international partners has been shifting for a number of years. At the end of the Cold War, the West initially dominated the landscape and could link offers of development cooperation to political conditions, such as the pursuit of democratic reforms or compliance with human rights. To be sure, the West was not always consistent in these pursuits, particularly where geostrategically relevant commodities were involved. But new players, such as China and the Gulf states of Saudi Arabia or Iran, are arriving on the scene and apparently offering support without political conditions. Russia, too, appears to be returning in order to make its move on Africa's chessboard.

Outlook

Fighting the pressures – together

The demonstrably encouraging developments in West Africa over the past 10 years have brought about a large number of “democracies in poverty” that are in urgent need of respectful, long-term cooperation. It is they, after all, who bear the weight of considerable pressure. Which approaches might deliver successful cooperation? We've known for some time now that this cannot involve simple imports of Western blueprints of success. Despite all the achievements of German federalism, for example, decentralization is probably not the silver bullet for most African states. In fragile democracies in which the state has only a limited monopoly on the use of force and must grapple with several social cleavages, clinging dogmatically to the principle of subsidiarity could undermine the central government's authority while fueling centrifugal forces that threaten to pull society apart.

Africa will not find its antidote in the Western – let alone Chinese, Russian or Saudi – way of doing things. Many reform-oriented governments have long understood that the rapidly growing influence of China, despite its claims of unconditional support, carries a price that mostly involves long-term dependencies. From a West African perspective, the influence of Turkey and the Gulf states of Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia, which not only compete with each other but are also exporting their respective ideologies, is particularly relevant. Many observers attribute the growth of religious extremism in Africa – which has traditionally featured a moderate form of Islam – to corresponding efforts in the region by the Gulf states.

However, demanding African solutions to African challenges does not mean that African countries should be expected to forgo the support of external partners in implementing such solutions. European and Western governments are, and will continue to be, called upon to offer this support. The threat of jihadism must be met with a political strategy that involves both a military and a civilian component. This also includes introducing approaches that effectively counter the spread of extremist ideologies.

Deepening regional cooperation efforts also remains essential. From coordinating efforts to contain epidemics, such as Ebola, to the concerted fight against jihadism or transnational crime, there are several issues that national governments cannot tackle by themselves. Promoting regional trade is another means of sustainably supporting development. Regional organizations have proved – perhaps surprisingly – to be an effective mechanism for promoting democracy. And in line with the current trend, peace missions should be staffed primarily by regional forces.

From a socioeconomic point of view, there is also an entire set of potentially relevant measures. There is much to suggest that controlling population growth involves more than a “hope and pray” attitude. Strengthening the role of women delivers benefits relevant to sociopolitical, economic and demographic issues. Introducing structural economic reforms remains another challenge. Rentier states, which are dependent on raw material exports, need to do more to promote economic diversification. Sovereign wealth funds created by the yields of raw material exports can be used to cushion the effects of price fluctuations, promote strategic investments and finance anticyclical measures. As far as the export of agricultural products is concerned, further dismantling the trade barriers faced by Africa’s farmers – particularly indirect subsidies – should be taken into consideration.

At the national level, we need to see a de-escalation of the conflict between Anglo- and Francophone communities in Cameroon through conflict-prevention measures. Like many other African autocrats, President Biya, out of fear of losing his grip on power, has deliberately refrained from cultivating his successor. Given his advanced age, the threat of a power vacuum is imminent. In the case of Mali, a growing number of observers are predicting that the U.N. mission currently at work there will fail. A quick retreat is arguably the worse alternative to persisting with what is clearly a difficult mission, but which must nonetheless be rendered more effective. If any measure is to yield a positive outcome, it must be linked to local interests. Local development agendas and the reform interests of key actors on the ground must form the baseline of any support provided.