

Sub-Saharan Africa: worrying clouds on the horizon

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Having long been condemned to pessimism, Africa has unquestionably picked itself up, confronting considerable challenges – such as the recent Ebola crisis –, displaying encouraging economic growth and exporting its numerous talents. On the threshold of the 21st century, a wave of Afro-optimism gradually developed. Did we go too far, too quickly down this road? This is the theory of Serge Michailof, economist, former top level manager at the World Bank and the French Development Agency (AFD), venturing a parallel with Afghanistan, another “humanitarian land” in the 1980s. Tending more towards Afro-realism, the author invites us to take stock of the perils which the continent will have to face, as well as the means it has at its disposal to overcome them.

After being presented as the hopeless continent, Africa definitely took off and has appeared on the contrary, since the beginning of this new millennium, as the continent of the future. It offers seemingly inexhaustible supplies of raw materials, its fast-growing population promises new commercial prospects, and urban growth is tremendous. Chinese, Indian and Turkish investors rub shoulders with American and Brazilian counterparts. The difficult years, characterised by the painful structural readjustments of the 1980s and 1990s, together with growing poverty, seem to belong to a distant past. The rehabilitated luxury hotels are rarely empty. Air France uses its giant Airbus A380s for certain flights to Africa. Optimism is back. Yet in this resolutely optimistic picture, it is hard to see the clouds forming on the horizon.

A seemingly lasting economic downturn

The first cloud is related to Africa's tremendous growth: whilst it has been driven since the beginning of the millennium by the sharp rise in the prices of raw materials, it is currently coming up against the significant, and no doubt lasting, fall in these prices. This phenomenon is due to a number of factors, particularly the global economic downturn, itself largely induced by the slowdown of Chinese growth. It highlights the fragility of the African economic model, with growth relying on the export of little or non-transformed raw materials, though some parts of the continent have additionally entered directly into the digital age.

Aside from a few exceptions, such as Ethiopia, where China played a driving role, the continent has not yet entered the value chains of industrial globalisation. Its growth is closely linked to the global price of raw materials, which it cannot influence. This delay in terms of industrialisation raises and will raise the difficult problem of employment in Africa, in the face of its insufficient economic diversification.

High levels of growth are not sufficient to create the jobs expected by youth, if this growth is not strongly inclusive. This is obvious in an essentially oil-driven country like Angola. But this is also true in the Ivory Coast, where the strong growth registered since 2012 (around 9% per year) is not sufficient to contain poverty in a context marked by sharp inequalities. The fact is that

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growth based on the export of raw minerals creates practically no jobs. In the Ivory Coast, jobs are essentially created by agricultural exports, the agro-industry, the construction and civil engineering sectors, and urban services. Yet in spite of the remarkable dynamism of the economy, – which may however be affected by the fall in cocoa prices – these sectors are not sufficient to respond to the demand for jobs by young people arriving on the labour market every month.

The gap between “winning” countries and regions and those in difficulty is growing

A second cloud prevents us from seeing that, behind an Africa which is winning, there is another which is stuck. And even in winning Africa, not everyone is a winner: there is still a lot of misery and inequality. In Ethiopia, three quarters of the urban population lives in shanty towns. The statistic is over half for the Ivory Coast. But generally speaking, the situation is most alarming in the neglected countryside of the Sahel. Hence in Niger, only 10% of the population has access to electricity and, in rural areas, the proportion is 0,2%. The digital economy which observers vaunt is still a distant dream. The great famines, which one imagines to belong to a bygone era, are back in the Sahelian region, and mainly affect its central and western areas, those plagued by conflicts, from the North-East of Niger to the Horn of Africa, by way of South Sudan and the Central African Republic.

Images of emaciated children and so-called ethnic massacres are still superimposed on those of turnpikes and skyscrapers built across capitals flush with recent economic and financial success. But what have humanitarians and developers been doing for half a century? One could hope that these sights belonged to another century. Yet if famines are still present, it is because the wars, which are their most frequent cause, are still ongoing. We are witnessing a return of political and ethnic conflict – as in South Sudan –, but also of conflicts of an ideological and religious nature in the entire Sahelian region. These phenomena lead to the emergence of the notorious “white zones”, where practically no external observers can penetrate without running a great risk. Who is still present in South Sudan, a country which has been failing since its creation in 2011, and where humanitarian workers must obtain a 10,000 dollars work permit in order to risk their lives on impossible paths?

Some countries are also prey to growing internal political tension, representing serious potential threats to fragile political equilibriums. This is especially the case in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, due to President Kabila’s will to remain in power against constitutional laws; it is the same in Burundi where, in an analogous situation, political and ethnic tensions are simmering, as in Mozambique, where a return to civil war threatens. So in the years to come, is Africa going to become the continent of humanitarian workers rather than the continent of investors, as was the case in the middle of the 1980s?

Insecurity becomes problematic in “forgotten” regions

Without a doubt, South Sudan, the Central African Republic and Somalia are borderline, exceptional cases. Yet beyond these “failed States”, what are we to make of the rise in daily insecurity which affects so many previously peaceful countries? The “red zones” grow and spread every year, and have been doing so for a decade, on the maps published by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, as well as on those produced by the United Nations or foreign embassies. In otherwise rich and organised countries such as Nigeria, there are immense regions where diplomats, construction company employees, engineers and mining technicians, as well as humanitarian workers – though they are integrated into the local population – live in fear.

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Because they know that they represent privileged targets, sought out by local gangsters who are ready to advantageously negotiate their sale to Mafia or jihadist groups.

How can we explain this rapid degradation of security in such vast regions which, not so long ago, attracted numerous tourists, and where formerly crews of the Paris-Dakar race circulated freely? We must first note that the regions in question share a number of particular characteristics: limited natural resources, an absent or degraded infrastructure network, no industrial activity except that linked to mining activities which operate as enclaves. Agriculture is seldom reliable, subjected to the consequences of environmental degradation, deforestation, and desertification. These regions are under- or un-administered by the State, which is dramatically absent as soon as one ventures out of the cities. If, in the centre of Mali, for example, police officers pack up as soon as insecurity spreads, it is simply because the vast fragile State, with its meagre budgetary resources, is incapable of ensuring the presence of a significant administrative apparatus throughout the territory, and even less capable of fulfilling its sovereign responsibilities when confronted with rising threats. And this situation is repeated in a number of neighbouring countries.

The security situation has therefore become a major concern, not only for Sahelian countries, but also for their neighbours like Senegal, the Ivory Coast and Cameroon. The insecurity in Mali constantly spills over into Niger and Burkina Faso. In the North-East of Nigeria, Boko Haram – the terrorist, jihadist movement which is nevertheless being fought by neighbouring countries in the G5S coalition¹ – is far from having lost its capacity for harm, causing great concern for all the countries bordering Lake Chad. As for the insecurity, which reigns in Somalia, it spills over into Kenya and Ethiopia. And the implosion in Libya, where the Fezzan region has become a lawless zone, is clearly an additional aggravating factor for nearby countries such as Chad, Niger and Mali.

If this insecurity is not brought under control, it threatens to paralyse investment as well as the free movement of people and goods. Like a cancer in a weakened body, its metastasis is spreading: terrorism, weapons and drugs trafficking, kidnappings, the gradual breakdown of law and order. We are finally realising that the economic paralysis affecting the North-East of Nigeria could spread to a good number of these regions if they do not react. As is the case in the north of Nigeria, such developments would inevitably lead to mass population movements.

The too slow demographic transition sharpens the employment problem

If these clouds are so concerning, it is because they cast a shadow over youth employment, a major issue for the stability of the continent, and the Sahelian region in particular. What political sustainability can a development model aspire to if it cannot create jobs to meet the needs generated by its demographics? Yet this appears to be out of control: the continent has barely begun its demographic transition, with an average fertility rate of 5.4 children per women (in the best and rarest cases this average is below 4, whereas it exceeds 7 in the Sahelian region). In a number of countries the population has literally exploded, like in the Ivory Coast, which went from 3.3 million inhabitants at the time of Independence to 24 million inhabitants today. If we applied the same multiplying coefficient of 7 to France, our population would exceed that of the United States! It is clear that demographic growth cannot continue at such a rhythm, first of all for simple budgetary reasons. Because school expenses linked to the arrival in schools of more

¹ The Sahel G5, or “G5S”, is the institutional framework for coordination and following up of regional cooperation in matters of development policy and security, created in 2014 by five Sahelian States: Mauritania, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger and Chad [Editor’s note].

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and more numerous cohorts of young people literally explodes education and health budgets which leads, in the end, to second rate school systems and downgraded health services. And finally the growth in the number of dependents means that the famous “demographic dividend” remains a mirage.

In the Sahelian region, the situation is particularly critical in rural areas where the population – unique case in the world – continues to grow by more than 2% per year. Under these conditions, in the bush, tensions over land use increase, the extensive model of agricultural development based on long fallow periods is no longer viable and leads to serious degradations in land value. Agricultural intensification has largely broken down, due to a lack of appropriate policies, public investment and applied research. There is a double responsibility, that of the sponsors who have widely abandoned this sector and that of the governments refusing to finance it correctly. Agricultural overpopulation and disinterest in rural areas have led to environmental degradation which has already been accentuated by global warming. This results in Malthusian crises localised in the most fragile regions which regularly depend on inter-regional trade and food aid in order to survive.

Finally, regarding the creation of industrial jobs, the perspectives are mediocre. The share of the manufacturing industry in the gross domestic product has been stagnating for 40 years at around 10%. In cities, the under-employment of youths condemned to odd jobs is therefore becoming increasingly problematic. Finally, at its current rhythm, Africa runs the risk of going from a development model based on low-productivity agriculture to one based on a service economy with equally low productivity, which would lead to a social and political deadlock. As the remarkable report from the Ghanaian think-tank ACET² highlights, practically no African country is truly on the path to emergence, with the exception of South Africa and Mauritius – particular cases – and possibly the Ivory Coast and Kenya.

The worrying situation is accentuated by the fragility of numerous States

This fragility is not unique to Africa. The symptoms can be found in the Middle East and in all countries which are ethnically or religiously mixed, with borders having been fixed, as in Africa, by imperialist powers. This is the case of the Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, countries which are far from being models of stability! The causes of this fragility are well-known: the State is too young to have been able to consolidate a true nation where the inhabitants share common values and imagine a collective destiny. Ethnic or religious diversity having not yet had time to be absorbed into a national melting-pot, each group falls back on its origins at the slightest political crisis and seeks out Kalashnikovs...

In these countries, where mixed communities have nevertheless coexisted in peace, it is demographic growth that has provoked reversals in power balances. Political games now take place in community, ethnic or religious frameworks, even though these frameworks are often social representations: we are of a certain ethnicity because we are perceived as such... State institutions are therefore particularly ineffective, for largely political reasons: the control of these institutions is subject to complex divisions between ethnic and religious communities, such-or-such a party or ethnicity controlling port activities, whilst another manages electricity companies or customs... Different parties' goals are often to “milk the institution” and maximise funds to the communities which “hold” them, rather than being efficient for the benefit of public interest.

² African Center for Economic Transformation, “Growth with Depth. African Transformation Report”, ACET, 2014.

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At the end of the day, none of this prevents sometimes high levels of growth and even a “pseudo-democratic” functioning, because it is most often based on the principle of “winner takes all”, in which political power controls funds, and this control in turn ensures the perpetuation of power... Yet the weakness of State institutions, and particularly sovereign ones, makes these States even more fragile, causing them to lose control of their peripheries and of desert or forest regions. In these regions, the sovereign apparatus is most often absent, and when it has half-abandoned representatives, most of the time they live off citizens as predators. All of which explains the collapse of a number of public services and of the army in Mali in 2012.

All in all, this fragility particularly affects the poor countries in the Sahelian region, but countries with strong growth and on the path to development, such as the Ivory Coast or Kenya, are not spared: in the absence of a political “deal” to share power and funds, political and ethnic conflict is still present and liable to degenerate into civil war. The case of the Ivory Coast, subjected to both the aforementioned incredible demographic shock, but also the economic shock linked to the bad management of the crisis at the end of the 1970s and the breakdown of the political agreements of the Houphouët-Boigny era, set the country into decline and led to the beginning of a civil war³. Yet, as the breakdown in Mali showed, it is in the Sahelian region that the situation is most worrying today.

The Sahelian region risks following in the footsteps of Afghanistan, with Mali on the front line

Paradoxically, despite the geographical distance and enormous cultural differences, the Sahelian region shares a lot of common characteristics with Afghanistan. I have been criticised for developing this comparison in my last book⁴. Yet I persist with it. To be sure, the snows of the Hindu Kush have little to do with the torrid Adrar des Ifoghas desert or the dried-out Aïr mountains. But the same set of characteristics, which largely contributed to the shipwreck of Afghanistan, can be found in the Sahelian region.

In both cases we can observe a demographic deadlock, agricultural stagnation in the absence of adequate policies, an environmental crisis, and terrible rural misery. We find mass unemployment affecting cohorts of unschooled youth who arrive each year in a stagnating job market: 270,000 in Niger and 400,000 in Afghanistan. We notice, amongst these youth, a loss of hope leading to migrations, and the temptation to enter into the parallel economy of illicit trafficking, cocaine and migrant-transport being the most profitable areas. We also note the persistence or aggravation of ethnic and religious fractures. We must finally underline the spread of the same wave of extremist Islam, inspired by Wahhabism and financed by the Gulf countries, which takes the place of a local, tolerant Islam.

In these circumstances, half-Mafia half-jihadi groups combine social action, religious activism and gangsterism. They maintain insecurity, gradually take control of certain territories, and often benefit from impenetrable foldback zones. In the face of these threats, we have seen that the countries of the Sahelian region are confronted with budgetary constraints which do not allow them to simultaneously finance the restoration of security, their development, and the social services required by the demographics, leading to non-responses which feed insecurity.

³ Let us not forget that, in this country, the current peace rests on a power-sharing agreement between the two main parties, which is likely to be called into question during the next presidential elections.

⁴ Serge Michailof, *Africanistan. L'Afrique en crise va-t-elle se retrouver dans nos banlieues ?*, Fayard, 2015.

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What lessons can be drawn from the Western failure in Afghanistan to benefit international aid in Africa?

Without doubt, in such environments, a part of Africa risks becoming a privileged zone of intervention for humanitarian aid and developmental assistance. But let there be no misunderstanding. If the international community approaches the problems in the Sahelian region in the same way as it did in Afghanistan, the results will be similar. Despite colossal military, humanitarian and development costs, Western countries failed in Afghanistan: the country is not stabilised, rebellions are gaining ground, democracy is failing and the economy is on its knees.

Certainly the West is not solely responsible for this catastrophic situation, the paranoia of the special services of the Pakistani army (ISI, Inter-Services Intelligence) certainly carry the main responsibility. But it nevertheless played its part. Both the modes of military intervention and of aid intervention turned out to be ineffective, if not counterproductive. No doubt it is important to objectively analyse these mistakes so as to avoid repeating them in the Sahelian region. At least three mistakes can be identified.

Firstly, whilst humanitarian action alone can alleviate dramatic suffering, it cannot constitute the solution to the problems afflicting these countries. The development of insecurity paralyzes it quite quickly. Its agents are targeted by hostile forces. Its resources become issues of power for the mafias who control the terrain. It does what it can, and saves lives. But it cannot be the solution.

Secondly, whilst security is no doubt the foremost priority for affected populations, it cannot be sustainably exercised by foreign powers, in the image of the French military operation Barkhane in the Sahel: they are quickly perceived as occupation forces. The same goes for United Nations peacekeeping forces, like those of Minusma [United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali, editor's note], whose inefficiency is proverbial. States must be helped back to their feet, which implies urgently building or rebuilding armed forces and national sovereign apparatuses. In Afghanistan, this work was only undertaken in 2009/2010, with eight years' delay, too late and still only partially. In the Sahel, due to a lack of resources, the reconstruction of institutions is being confused with equipment provision and training courses, which implies getting the former out of these nepotistic systems: this is not only technically complicated, but politically very difficult, if not impossible, if leaders reveal themselves to be involved in the clientelist and predatory system.

Consolidating or rebuilding the sovereign apparatus means accepting to finance it in order to reform it, including in terms of functioning. This is justified by budgetary considerations, since it is less expensive to finance the reconstruction and functioning of a local army than to maintain an expeditionary force. But it is also because regional insecurity is a regional, if not global public scourge, which justifies the sharing of the corresponding costs. In this regard, if international resources are not urgently made available to respond to these needs, it will be a recipe for disaster in the Sahel.

Finally, the third lesson is that we cannot let aid agencies act at their convenience with façade coordination, objectives defined by public opinion, and real chaos in the field where all vie for the few local personnel with managerial and technical skills. In these countries in crisis, indeed, the rules established at multiple conferences of donors regarding aid coordination do not work. It is necessary to set up stringent budgetary planning mechanisms for sponsors, generally based on multi-sponsor trust funds, enabling the imposition of clear strategic choices for sponsors which

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correspond to the effective priorities of these countries. Only such a strategic approach would allow for a rational allocation of aid budgets, which, otherwise, quickly develop serious distortions and inconsistencies. Let us also recall that donors decided to assign less than 4% of their resources to agricultural development in Mali at their conference in October 2015...

Humanitarian aid, an element amongst many others... that are ultimately more important

In short, the priority needs of these regions in crisis are multiple. They first require security to be restored, which cannot be achieved by sending foreign or UN expeditionary forces, but rather by financially supporting national sovereign institutions, a sector which nobody wants to fund. The other pressing need is job creation, which requires reinvestment in the agricultural and rural sectors, though very few sponsors are interested in these questions or still possess technical skills in these areas on the field. Another priority is obviously birth control, a taboo subject that no donor wants to hear about – with the exception of the Gates Foundation and the British DFID [Department for international development, editor's note], both absent from the Sahel. Finally, the sectors of primary education and professional training must be reinvested in these countries, sectors which remain real disasters, in spite of the billions which have been sometimes devoted to them. These tasks are immense. Humanitarian aid must play its part. But it can only be one element in an ambitious global approach if the international community does not want to be condemned to focusing on emergency aid alone for the rest of the century when all the other approaches have failed or, as in Afghanistan, been put in place too late.

Translated from the French by Juliet Powys

Biography • Serge Michailof

Associate researcher at the *Institut de relations internationales et stratégiques* (IRIS), and consultant specialising in issues surrounding fragile States in conflict. He taught for nearly 10 years at the Institute of Political Science and at Sorbonne-Paris 1 University. He was one of the operations managers for the World Bank, and the executive director of operations at the French Development Agency (AFD). Over the course of a career spanning half a century, he has worked in more than 65 countries, on all continents. His latest book, *Africanistan. L'Afrique en crise va-t-elle se retrouver dans nos banlieues ?* [*Africanistan: will Africa in crisis wind up in our suburbs?*], was published in French in 2015 by Fayard. Serge Michailof studied in France (École des Hautes études commerciales de Paris [HEC], bachelors' degree in sociology, doctorate in economy), and in the United States (Massachusetts Institute of Technology [MIT]).

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