

Evidence – Policy – Action (EPA)
Center of Excellence

Evidence ecosystem and development policies: Francophone West Africa Regional Profile

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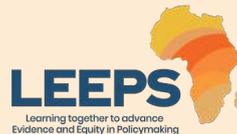
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Key messages

Strengthening the use of evidence for more relevant and effective public policies in Francophone West Africa: The role of a Center of Excellence for better decision making

- The need to establish evidence-based public policies has become essential in West Africa, in the context of today's development challenges. High-quality data based on sound theoretical benchmarks enables the formulation of policies that are more effective and better suited to the needs of populations. The *Evidence-Policy-Action* Center of Excellence aims to facilitate the use of evidence for relevant strategic decisions in Francophone West African countries, thereby strengthening the legitimacy and positive impact of public interventions.
- Systems for producing and using data for public policymaking have been shaped by the region's colonial and post-colonial history, with significant disparities among countries and a strong influence from international institutions. To date, these systems have reproduced a tradition of public policies that rarely involve the beneficiary populations in an optimal way, thus reducing their influence on the choice of priorities and implementation methods.
- Today, West Africa faces many challenges (climate change, social inequalities, a demographic dynamic with a high proportion of low-skilled, unemployed young people, etc.) that require coordinated, evidence-based policy responses.
- The current evidence ecosystem in West Africa is characterized by a multiplicity of stakeholders (ministries, universities, NGOs, *Think Tanks*) and a fairly abundant output in the health, education, and agricultural sectors. However, disparities still exist within and between countries in terms of infrastructure and research services.
- Lack of coordination between advocates hinders synergy of efforts and limits the system's ability to produce high-quality data to support coherent and efficient policies. Moreover, the use of evidence is not well established, and there are no reliable platforms for sharing and leveraging data.
- In response to these challenges, the *Evidence-Policy-Action* Center of Excellence is acting as a catalyst to promote a strong evidence ecosystem in the region. It contributes to building the capacity of advocates and facilitating exchanges between researchers, decision makers, and practitioners. This center could offer greater harmonization and coherence of public policies through ongoing support for the use of

reliable data for strategic and operational decisions.

- Strengthening West Africa's evidence ecosystem requires coordinated efforts to address structural barriers. Recommendations include strengthening regional cooperation, harmonizing data collection and analysis tools, and raising awareness about the centrality of evidence in public policy.
- Training and technical support programs for local stakeholders are essential to ensure the effective use and ownership of evidence in the region's sustainable development processes.



Introduction

Beyond the benefits they are expected to bring to the whole nation, or specific social categories, public policy has two critical implications that require careful attention to their quality. On the one hand, it is a question of their social acceptability, but above all, it is a question of their practical feasibility, in other words, the possibility of mobilizing the public human and material resources needed to implement them. Moreover, the resource allocations often come at the price of trade-offs, the opportunity costs of which are sometimes not insignificant. This requirement for the dual legitimization of public policies makes the process of formulating them complex, with implications for the quality of the data on which they are based and for which they are justified, and therefore for the processes of mobilizing such data. This requirement for dual legitimization is not new, and it applies to all countries, including those in Africa, especially after the first three decades after independence, during which their economic policy choices were largely in line with the colonial-era choices.

The general economic crisis of the 1980s led to an even more assertive demand for evidence to support public policies, which would have to come from systematic collections based on credible and explicit theoretical assumptions or benchmarks, so that the results could be verified independently of the claims made by those responsible for these policies and actions. The development of the social sciences and humanities in parallel with these changes makes it possible to respond to this challenge. Since then, the term "evidence-based" has come to be used to describe public policies.

West Africa faces complex challenges to which the stakeholders involved in public action must provide fair, appropriate, effective, and sustainable responses. The need for evidence is therefore particularly acute here. Indeed, evidence is an essential tool for understanding challenges, formulating appropriate responses, and thus relevant policies (in terms of the theories of change on which they are based and their better cost-benefit ratio) and assessing their impact. The complexity of these challenges derives from their gravity and interlocking nature. These include:

- Increasing poverty and inequalities in access to basic social facilities and services (education, health, water and sanitation, housing, social assistance, security, etc.), which require accurate data for relevant, targeted, and effective policies for the benefit of the most vulnerable populations, or which help to reduce these inequalities;
- Such effects of climate change, as drought, flooding, and soil erosion, have significant consequences for the region's economies and societies.

Climate and environmental data, as well as information on the responses of affected individuals and groups, are essential to the development of relevant adaptation and mitigation strategies. Furthermore, conflicts and economic shocks (some of which are the consequences of climate change) put vulnerable groups' livelihoods at risk and require specific data for appropriate policies;

- Infectious diseases, maternal and child health problems, and non-communicable diseases, whose growing incidence is becoming increasingly worrying and requires accurate data, adequate monitoring of progress, and assessment of the effectiveness of health and nutrition programs.

At the same time, the limited financial resources available to West African states to address these pressing challenges require that such resources be allocated with maximum efficiency, while ensuring transparency and compliance with the conditionalities or contractual terms set by donors and financial partners. Achieving this level of rigor is only possible through the use of advanced optimization tools based on high-quality data collected using reliable methodologies - that is, evidence.

In response to this major need in the West African region, the African Centre for Equitable Development (ACED) and the Initiative Prospective Agricole et Rurale (IPAR) are implementing an initiative to establish a Center of Excellence for Francophone West Africa. Its mission is to facilitate the integration of evidence into public interventions - whether policies, programs, plans, or projects.

Referred to as the *Evidence-Policy-Action Center of Excellence*, the Center will serve as both a laboratory and a hub of expertise supporting policymakers and development practitioners. At this stage, the Center covers seven countries: Benin, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal, and Togo. Its overarching mission is to support the mobilization of evidence to inform strategic, operational, and tactical decision-making in each of these countries and across the broader region.

As part of the launch of the Center of Excellence's activities, ACED and IPAR decided to take stock of the *Evidence-Policy System (EPS)* in each of the relevant countries in the West African sub-region, and to identify challenges, opportunities, and entry points for the Center's contributions. This diagnostic included a content curation and capitalization phase, a consultation phase with EPS stakeholders in each country, with in-depth interviews with some key and influential EPS stakeholders before and after multi-stakeholder consultations.

This report presents the results of this process and proposes actions to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of EPS in these countries and the sub-region. The report begins with a brief overview of the history of public development policies in French-speaking countries in Africa. It then

provides a synopsis of the capabilities of the evidence ecosystem within the countries and the sub-region as documented during the diagnostic process. This synopsis identifies the challenges and opportunities around which actions will be designed for capacity building of the respective ecosystems to mobilize evidence for relevant public policy needs.

Brief History of Development Policies in Francophone West Africa

Development policies in Francophone West Africa, as in the majority of former colonies in Africa and perhaps elsewhere, are conceived and implemented **on a top-down basis**, often **by a political and administrative elite** that establishes priorities and implementation procedures **with limited involvement of the populations concerned**. Basically, the development consists of (1) building infrastructure, (2) providing social services aimed at improving the living conditions of the population, (3) financing, mainly through the earnings of agricultural and mining products export, with credits and subsidies from the former colonial power and international institutions. This culture of elaborating development public policies is a historical construction, which is now taken for granted by stakeholders.

As a matter of fact, the French-speaking West African region was made up of French colonies. The first French trading posts in West Africa were established in Gorée and Saint-Louis (Senegal) as early as the 16th century, but they were primarily used for the slave trade. The colonization campaign gained momentum in the 19th century (especially after the Berlin Conference of 1885), taking over nearly four (4) centuries of slavery perpetrated by traders from Portugal, Spain, Denmark, England, and France, with the collaboration of local rulers. The French and the English people (unlike the Spanish, Portuguese, and Danish people) have been particularly active in West African territories, colonizing them and directing them to various forms of agricultural and mining development for the benefit of their respective countries. The developmental project was introduced by France (and other European colonial powers at the time) as a result of the changes in world geopolitics brought about by World War II. In the aftermath of independence, most young states saw government action and development policies as an extension of the original colonial development plans.

From development to drafting development policies for the colonies

Following on from the slave trade and like other European countries¹ at the

1 Most Western European countries were involved in the triangular trade. After the Berlin Conference, only Britain, France, Spain, the Netherlands, Portugal, and Germany were actively involved in the colonization campaign.

time, France began to colonize territories in Africa and other continents that represented both (1) important sources of agricultural and mining raw materials essential to France's industrialization, (2) potential markets for French-manufactured goods, and (3) investment opportunities for French companies. Hence, '*the development of colonies*', the real purpose of colonization, even though lofty ideological objectives of the *civilizing mission* had often been announced, with the concomitant presence of evangelization missions². Until the end of World War II, French companies and public authorities continued to exploit and administer colonial territories with the sole aim of exploiting them, relying on African trade auxiliaries for this purpose.

Public action with the stated aim of promoting development in the geographical area that is now referred to as Francophone West Africa³, did not begin until the aftermath of World War II. The international context was then marked by the creation of the UN and the Bretton Woods institutions⁴. That environment was unfavorable, even hostile to colonial empires. Most African peoples claimed independence or a form of autonomy from Metropolitan France, in accordance with the resolutions of the Brazzaville Conference of 1944⁵.

As a result, the Overseas Territories (the colonies and trusteeship territories of Togo and Cameroon) could then elect Territorial Assemblies with legislative power, especially over budgetary matters, where the native population had a majority of seats. The groups of territories (F.W.A. and A.E.F.) also each had a Grand Council, with members elected by the

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- 2 Some authors present evangelization as an instrument of the colonial project, together with integration in the market economy and military campaigns, the 3Ms (Missionaries, Merchants, Militarists). While there is no denying that evangelization missions were complicit (passive or active) with colonization, it is a fact that colonization was carried out by states, while evangelization was carried out by Christian non-governmental organizations such as the SMA (Society of Missionaries of Africa), which were independent of the French administration. Though these missions required the prior approval of their country's administration, they could not be considered to have been sponsored or driven by the colonial states.
 - 3 Today's Francophone West Africa historically consisted of French West Africa (FWA) and Togo. The FWA was formed as French colonization progressed in West Africa. Eventually, Mauritania, Senegal, French Sudan (that became Mali since September 22, 1960), Guinea, Côte d'Ivoire, Niger, Upper Volta (that became Burkina Faso since August 4, 1984) and Dahomey (that became Benin since November 30, 1975) all joined. Togo, like Cameroon in Central Africa, was a German colony that the League of Nations (LN, the UN's forerunner) placed under the dual mandate (which became a guardianship or protectorate in 1945) of France and England in 1919. Togo was then divided into two parts, the southwest (known as Togoland), attributed to Great Britain, which immediately joined neighboring Ghana, and the eastern part (now Togo), attributed to France. Cameroon was also divided into two territories, the western part attributed to Great Britain and the eastern part, which made up most of the territory, was attributed to France. It was exactly the case of French Equatorial Africa (AEF), then made up of Gabon, Congo, Oubangui-Chari (which became Central African since August 13, 1960), and Chad, to which French-speaking Cameroon was added.
 - 4 These include the IMF, the International Monetary Fund created in July 1944, and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD, or World Bank) created in December 1945. The United Nations (UN) was established in October 1945.
 - 5 Among other things, the conclusions of this conference proclaimed the will of the colonial power to finance the economic development of the territories (through the modernization of colonial economies), to work to improve the living conditions of the populations and to involve the so-called evolved indigenous peoples in the political action within the colonial empire. (See Muracciole, 2017).

territorial assemblies. These assemblies exercised their mandate under the strong tutelage of the Council of State, while the executive power remained in the hands of the Governors, placed directly under the authority of the French Government. (See Berthélemy, 1980). It was within this institutional framework and in accordance with the declarations of the Brazzaville Conference that a ten-year development plan for 1946-1955 was initiated⁶. This was the first time that a '**public**' policy dedicated to the '**development**' of these territories was mentioned. The financial mechanism set up to implement this plan consisted of FIDES (Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development) and the CCFOM (Central Bank of Overseas France)⁷.

The results are impressive. The Gross Fixed Capital Formation between 1946 and 1960 amounted to about 450 billion FCFA in constant 1960 francs. But beyond these absolute figures, what most interests us here is the degree to which these first so-called development policies have so far impacted the public policy model and the living conditions of the region's populations. Indeed, the elaboration process of these plans and the options for the sectoral and spatial distribution of the funds instilled in these territories are a culture of public action and development policy options that are still in use today. In this particular case, all decisions concerning the allocation and implementation arrangements of the plans were taken centrally by the metropolis. When it comes to the sectors financed, the first and second plans respectively allocated 60% and more than 40% of the funds to infrastructure construction (the ports of Abidjan and Dakar, the University of Dakar, the seats of the territorial assemblies, roads, rural tracks, railways, etc.). Meanwhile, the construction of social facilities (schools, hospitals, etc.) accounted for around 20% of each plan, while productive investment received only 20% in the first plan and barely 30% in the second.

In addition, two territories, Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire, accounted for a very large share of the investments, 25% and 19% of financing over the period, due in part to the great interest metropolitan France had in the products of these territories (peanuts and phosphate for Senegal, coffee, cocoa and bananas for Côte d'Ivoire, where the plantations are mostly owned by Europeans). On the other hand, Mauritania, Upper Volta (now Burkina Faso) and Niger received very little of this funding. Benin, Guinea (with its iron ore), and Togo, where the oil palm industry was just getting off the ground, were slightly better off (see Berthélemy, 1980). These agricultural and mining products were exported unprocessed (raw), and Senegal's only

6 However, in 1949, France adopted a four-year plan (1949-1953), followed by a five-year plan (1953-1957). In 1958, the Plan came to an end as a result of the autonomy granted to the territories as a prelude to their independence.

7 The FIDES (Investment Fund for Economic and Social Development) created under a law dated 04/30/1946 is dedicated to the planning of investments in the Overseas Territories (TOM) while the CCFOM (Central Bank of Overseas France) manages the FIDES treasury and grants long-term loans (25 years) and very low interest rates (2.2%) to the Territories for their participation in FIDES financing. The CCFOM uses its funds to grant loans and advances to public and private companies contributing to the implementation of the Plan. (Berthélemy, 1980:302)

peanut oil crushing plant was subject to a quota system in favor of oil mills in metropolitan France.

The consequences of these decisions for the region's economic structure continue to this day. The emphasis on building social infrastructure and facilities has led to the development of the construction and public works sector and the rapid increase in the number of government officials responsible for infrastructure management and social services, as well as an acceleration in the cost of education and health. The construction of many schools between 1947 and 1960 increased the number of students sixfold, and public expenditure on education rose from 560 million CFA francs in 1947 to 11 billion CFA francs in 1960. Health care expenditure rose from 770 million CFA francs in 1947 to 7.6 billion CFA francs in 1960, with a consequent increase in the number of civil servants, whose salaries were indexed to those of metropolitan France from 1950 onwards. While these investments in health and education were vital to improving people's living conditions and to the proper functioning of all other sectors of the economy, they were unfortunately not linked to a local productive system. In addition to the civil servants' bodies, they had enabled the development of a commercial sector for the collection and export of primary agricultural products, followed by the import and distribution of manufactured goods from Europe.

Local government expenditure, which accounted for 23% of GDP, was more than 60% made up of wage payments to civil servants, whose consumer goods were mostly imported from the metropolis to the benefit of the trading houses. The vast majority of rural peasants lived on the fringes of this economy with subsistence agriculture and supplied the market with only products that allowed them to pay the capitation tax and later timidly imported goods such as lamps, bicycles, loincloths, radio sets, sheet metal, etc. The consequence of all this is a huge increase in imports of consumer goods, leading to a chronic trade deficit, due to the absence of a manufacturing base and low export earnings from agricultural products subject to the vagaries of the weather and low, fluctuating market prices.

Ultimately, the concept of well-being and good living conditions is not based on the vision of local communities, the vast majority of which were rural at the time. The high-tech development model tacitly instilled in the population consists of infrastructure, on the one hand, and increased monetary incomes on the other, in order to produce the extravagant consumption style that is seen as an improvement in living standards. As the agricultural sector was not very lucrative, only urban civil servants, construction workers, or traders enjoyed a relative increase in their incomes and were therefore, according to the representations being made, those whose living conditions seemed to be improving the best. This perception has been the origin of the mass exodus seen since then to the main urban centers: Dakar's population increased from 170,000 in 1945 to 400,000 in 1960, Abidjan's from 50,000 to 300,000, Cotonou's from 50,000 to 150,000, and

Lomé's from 40,000 to about 120,000.

Development Policies in Francophone West African Countries

In the French-speaking countries of West and Central Africa, post-independence public policies were an extension of post-World War II colonial policies. They have been largely supported by international institutions (in particular UNDP and the World Bank), but especially by post-colonial financing structures such as the Fonds d'Aide et de Coopération (FAC)⁸. In terms of their relevance and social acceptability, these choices seemed obvious to the economic and social needs arising from the paths created by colonial power. These included public infrastructure, in particular roads (in the spirit of exploiting the colonies by exporting agricultural and mining raw materials), education, and health care, with the creation of a small emerging elite made up of political cadres, administrative and service officials, soldiers, and students. All of them were growing and burdening the state budget with no equivalent in public revenue. In addition, there is the embryonic private sector, which also heavily depends on public funds.

Three quite different types of rhetoric accompanied state actions in Francophone West African countries during this period. Indeed, we have:

- Regimes that tended to be capitalist or right-wing in orientation and had strong economic and political ties with France and Western Europe. These include Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin (until 1972), Niger (until 1974), Burkina Faso (until 1984), Mali (after 1968);
- Socialist or radical left-wing orientation regimes. These include Guinea (until 1984), Mali (until 1968), Benin (from 1972 to 1989), Burkina Faso (from 1984 to 1987);
- Regimes claiming to defend African authenticity. This was mainly Togo, from 1967 to 1990

These regimes had different ideological principles, even if they all used centralized management of state capitalism in the conduct of public development policies. The main difference is that, while the former's policies were an extension of the colonial development policy outlined above, the latter's, particularly those of the second category, adopted a rather left-wing revolutionary populism in their choice of public policy priorities. In addition to moving away from the former colonial power, these regimes often challenged the privileges of elites and traditional or feudal elites and

8 The Fonds d'Aide et de Coopération (FAC) was created in March 1959 on the eve of the independence of the Francophone countries of West and Central Africa. The FAC replaced the FIDES, while already in 1958, the CCFOM regulations had been amended to create the Caisse Centrale de Coopération Économique (CCCE).

chieftainships who were seen as accomplices in the 'colonial and post-colonial system of human exploitation'. Moreover, the institutional framework designed by these regimes to conduct development actions is often pyramid-shaped in terms of popular and non-elitist representation, opening up spaces for young people and women to express themselves. For these regimes, political choices were based on populist validations supported by so-called class-struggle theories, rather than objectively established evidence. These regimes have been called socialist or Marxist dictatorships.

Despite their apparent differences, these three categories of regime faced the 1980s economic crisis in the same way, forcing them to undertake successive structural adjustment programs with the IMF and the World Bank. In the late 1980s, the fall of the Berlin Wall with the collapse of the socialist system led to the emergence of a strong neo-liberal current and a wave of demands for multi-party democracy in all African countries, including those in the first category of regimes.

Development policies in the multi-party neoliberal context

Although the measures of the structural adjustment programs had been largely imposed on the African countries, they had in principle to be built around verifiable hypotheses open to public debate, because of the democratic openness claimed/imposed as being inseparable from the process of solving the social and political crises that shook these countries. This has diversified the landscape of public policy stakeholders, with members of political parties of different persuasions, members of civil society organizations, and stakeholders from decentralized local authorities.

Moreover, the connection of national economies to the world market can no longer be achieved in the shadow of preferential trade arrangements between partners linked by historical colonial relationships, but can be aligned with the rules of neoliberalism and globalization that have been in place since the late 1980s.

Architecture and capabilities of the evidence, research, and development policies ecosystem

To some extent, Francophone West African countries bear the colonial and post-colonial legacy of public development policy architecture and data production tools for development, monitoring, and evaluation. Thus, while the problems of rural and urban household livelihoods and human capital development are shared by all of these countries, the magnitudes are different among the broad categories of countries with contrasting colonial experiences, resulting in today's differential challenges. The same applies to public and private research and data production institutions (Universities, Research Institutes, *Think Tank*, Non-Governmental Organizations, etc.). In terms of infrastructure provision and coverage of basic social services, we can thus distinguish three main categories:

- Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire have benefited from the exploitation of their raw materials since the colonial period: peanuts and phosphate for Senegal, coffee, cocoa, rubber, pineapple, and bananas for Côte d'Ivoire. The first University of Senegal, the current Cheik Anta Diop University, was created in 1957 to cover all the Francophone West Africa, while the Centre d'enseignement supérieur d'Abidjan was created in 1958 to become a university in 1963.
- In Benin and Togo, modest palm, coconut, cocoa, and cotton plantations emerged. The Higher Institute of Benin, a university-type center, was established only in 1965 and shared by Benin and Togo until it was split into two separate universities in 1970.
- In Niger and Burkina Faso, cotton and peanuts were beginning to be cultivated, and gold and uranium were being extracted. The first University of Niger, the current Abdou Moumouni University of Niamey, was established in 1971, while the current Joseph Ki-Zerbo University, the first in Burkina Faso, was established in 1974.

As a result, the political trajectories of these countries can be divided into three broad categories :

- Senegal is alone in the first category, reflecting a relatively long and continuous multi-party democratic tradition, which experienced no coup, revolution, or political upheaval when the Berlin Wall fell. Although the Socialist Party ruled the country from 1960 to 2000, this was at the price of presidential elections that stakeholders deemed fair.

- Côte d'Ivoire, also alone in the second category, experienced no political disruption between 1960 and 1990.
- All the other countries (Benin, Togo, Burkina Faso and Niger) experienced political crises during the period from 1960 to 1990, some with revolutionary experiences (Benin and Burkina Faso) and others with sovereignist or nationalist experiences (Togo and Niger).

The successive structural adjustment programs to which all these countries have been subject since the late 1980s have also helped to give these respective architectures a fairly similar profile. Of course, intractable differences remained between these countries, resulting from their respective weight in colonial politics and the differential economic and socio-political trajectories that followed until the late 1980s.

The current architecture of evidence generation

Architecture is characterized by a plurality of advocates (producers, users, and intermediaries of evidence), with the preponderance of those involved in the production and use of evidence, and the relative absence of intermediaries in all sectors except human development.

When it comes to data production, in most cases within the framework of the projects, it is mainly the ministries that lead and animate the ecosystem via their technical directorates and agencies. To this end, they shall collaborate with research organizations, statistical institutes, and private firms in order to produce these data. There are many findings in the sectors of health, education, agriculture, food systems, and human development. However, it is modest in the fields of environment and the non-agricultural productive sectors, and in the so-called informal economies. One emerging theme is digital technology and small and medium-sized businesses.

Legal provisions encourage and support the production of such data (framework laws on development planning and policy evaluation, on data and statistics), while regulating the use of such data (laws on statistical activities).

In addition, civil society has become very active in the production and use of data, in particular to influence policies and projects. The financing and valorization of PD are handled by public structures, non-governmental organizations, cooperation agencies, and the United Nations. All of these stakeholders organize capacity building workshops for advocates involved in the production and use of evidence.

Elements of the national or subregional context

Certain elements of the context of these countries and the subregion represent opportunities for boosting the evidence ecosystem. However, others are threats to such a development. These factors need to be understood by stakeholders in order to properly assess the challenges to be overcome and the pitfalls to be avoided.



Opportunities and challenges for the evidence, research, and development policies ecosystem in West Africa

Beyond the contrasting developments within Francophone West Africa, the countries of this subregion constitute a space where social and political dynamics as well as development challenges represent a challenge to public stakeholders for the development of an ecosystem capable of meeting the requirements in terms of evidence commensurate with the challenges of well-being and fulfillment of the region's populations. The Center of Excellence, which is the subject of this operation, has therefore become a historical requirement for this socio-political area.

Opportunities for a Center of Excellence for the Evidence Ecosystem

The current environmental, economic, social, and political upheavals are challenging national ecosystems to renew and harmonize the cultures of production and use of evidence for public policy in the region.

Climate change across West Africa, irrespective of language and cultures, is causing radical changes in crop systems, pastoral, and agro-pastoral systems. These changes induce adjustments within and between agricultural areas, which have economic and social implications worthy of substantial political support for the construction of living together, social cohesion, and shared well-being within this area.

Demographic dynamics are combined with these physical challenges. Indeed, the population growth, the high youth demographic, and the migration movements within countries, territories, and across the Mediterranean and the Atlantic demand sophisticated analytical frameworks to drive consequential policy responses. The growth of digital technology, social networks, and commercial and electronic exchanges creates opportunities for policy shortcuts that can only be optimally exploited by a geopolitical space-wide ecosystem.

Delays already experienced in consistently dealing with these geophysical and socio-demographic challenges are one of the causes of increasing social inequalities, with the poverty and precariousness of an increasingly large proportion of the population. Meanwhile, a minority of elites, heirs to

the colonial and post-colonial constructions of a trading economy offering privileges to a class of rent-seeking intermediaries, reproduce themselves in a primitive type of capitalism barely useful to the local emergent productive sectors. All this contributes to the growing insecurity in the sub-region, which in turn becomes a handicap to sustainable economic emergence.

The recent political changes in the sub-region with the emergence of new contrasting and post-democratic forms of political legitimacy (as seen in the ASS countries and the new political regimes in Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin and Senegal), offer a new window of legitimacy for a Center of Excellence outside the traditional sub-regional institutions of ECOWAS and WAEMU. Such a center would be well able to facilitate economic policy dialogue in the current context of renewed geopolitical relations with Europe, the USA, the BRICS countries, and other African sub-regions.

Challenges in promoting evidence uses

In some countries, the major challenges to making the most of the evidence ecosystem lie in the fact that the culture of using evidence in the formulation and implementation of development policies has not yet taken root, particularly in contexts where accountability practices are limited. Also, the requirement for data producers to have a statistical authorization for surveys is sometimes a challenge, while the analytical tools are sometimes inadequate, and there is no data quality control mechanism. Furthermore, it is often difficult to have access to the results of policy and project evaluations, even though they are essential inputs for the design of relevant studies and surveys.

These difficulties of access are exacerbated in ecosystems that are unstructured, disjointed, and marked by a lack of synergy, cooperation, and coordination between their various stakeholders, with the difficulty of implementing and running reliable and credible platforms for data integration and sharing. As a result, the lack of cross-sectoral coordination and weak institutional capacities observed in some areas are simply a reflection of the absence of a culture of accountability and use of evidence in government action. When they occur in such environments, political unrest acts as an exacerbating factor.

Action levers for fostering an evidence ecosystem to support development policies in West Africa

If the Center of Excellence is welcomed by stakeholders, the obstacles it may face in the process of being activated need to be explored. It will

therefore be necessary to agree on its role and its contributions or added values for national ecosystems and the sub-regional ecosystem.

A major lever for action is to clarify the concept of 'proof' of evidence in the social, historical, cultural, and political contexts of each country and the sub-region. At this point, we cannot ignore the different representations that exist in terms of individual and collective well-being and development. The colonial power produced an arbitrary conception focused on its interests, which has been the subject of various adjustments by international institutions since the 1950s (hunger and poverty reduction, Agenda 21 in 1992, the UN Millennium Declaration in 2000, the UN Sustainable Development Goals in 2015, as well as the concepts of human development directed by the United Nations system). A community-based approach to well-being would be pursued, with the challenges, priorities, and trade-offs that each would consider necessary in terms of allocating resources for this purpose. Such a discussion is prejudicial to the establishment of the Center of Excellence in each country involved and at the sub-regional level.

In addition, financial and technical resources will need to be mobilized to enhance the value of existing evidence as a means of promoting the ecosystem in the view of stakeholders. A unique added value of the Center of Excellence would be the promotion of a culture of cooperation, sharing, and interoperability between the data production centers and between them and all other relevant advocates in the system.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Center of Excellence is an undeniable need in the current context and is expressed explicitly by the participants in the exchanges in the countries targeted by this operation. To ensure better synergy of action within the ecosystem and effective, efficient operation of such a Center of Excellence, the stakeholders suggested the following ways of addressing the issues and challenges :

- Conduct a genuine feasibility study based on the existing situation and identified needs;
- Develop innovative technologies and tools, then offer specialized training programs for stakeholders in all sectors on methods and tools for collecting, processing, using, and promoting evidence;
- Raise awareness among relevant institutions of the importance of evidence and clarify the legal and institutional framework for public policy governance and data ecosystem;
- Advocate to advocacy with relevant institutions for the development of resources for the production and use of evidence;
- Support stakeholders from each country in the mobilization and use of evidence through the establishment of expert hubs for decision makers and development practitioners;
- Support collaborative and knowledge-sharing processes while harmonizing systems for collecting, processing, and sharing evidence and improving access to evidence for all stakeholders (researchers, policymakers, practitioners, associations, etc.);
- Facilitate exchanges between practitioners and decision makers, promoting mutual learning, the adoption of best practices, supporting the digitalization of the public sector, and strengthening the role of intermediaries.

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