

# Interview with H.E. President Mohamed Bazoum, Republic of Niger

Before the events of the 26th of July, President Mohamed Bazoum of Niger had devoted a significant proportion of an interview, as well as the country's annual budget, to education. With a focus on supporting young girls' education and the infrastructure that strategy would entail, the overall quality and reform of Niger's education system was deemed as important as security. The added benefit of this focus on education was one of socio-economic development for the country, decelerating the current levels of unsustainable demographic growth, which in turn would reduce poverty and mitigate security risks.

With this G20 edition of the Development Cooperation Review (DCR) in mind, a segment of the interview on education and development cooperation was finalised on July 14th. In an effort to help inform Nigeriens at this crucial time, the DCR partnered with Le Grand Continent to publish the paper in French, as well as on the occasion of India's Presidency of the G20 summit, September 9th in New Delhi.

**DCR: Your Excellency often talks about the importance of developing the education system in Niger in order to offer more opportunities to young people while mitigating demographic growth. What programmes have been put in place to improve the education system?**

**Mohamed Bazoum (MB):** We are a country with very high demographic growth. Half of our population is under 15, and the fertility rate is 6.2 per woman. This is a symptom of the inadequacy of the education system. It's very clear, it's well-known. It is also the cause of great poverty due to water stress and our successive debts. The risk we are exposed to is that this demographic growth will, in turn, increase poverty, and we will be in a spiral that can only generate situations

of instability and conflict due to the lack of general resources. Incidentally, the violence currently being perpetrated by terrorist movements in the Sahel region is also symptomatic of the poverty I am talking about, generated by demographic growth. To tackle this problem at its root, we need to promote the education system. Because education has a direct impact, in the medium term, on family culture, demographic composition and the birth rate. A certain amount of family, social, sexual and economic education is needed in the curricula that we want to introduce to have an impact on social and family mores and culture in Niger.

We have decided two things: to raise the level at which we train our teachers. Professional training for the teaching profession will last two years

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rather than one, and will require a higher minimum level of education. The more we inform, the more we will have a critical mass whose integration into the education system will help to improve student performance because it is the teacher's performance that is the condition for improving student performance. Training and recruiting competent human capital is necessary to improve the academic performance of pupils and the summative assessments of the school-going population.

The other aspect of our reform is that we have observed that when a girl goes to school without the conditions that offer her the essential amenities so that her parents are confident and will let her continue her schooling, she runs the risk of dropping out as quickly as possible. Dropping out of school is correlated with a certain school climate of confidence and security for children and teenagers. What often happens is that at the end of the first or second year of secondary school, many children are expelled, especially girls, for reasons of morals or truancy. What I've decided to do is set up boarding schools for girls in rural secondary schools so that the state can take full care of girls. In this way, we will be able to shelter girls and protect them from the risks of marriage and early motherhood. By giving them the conditions they need to acquire real skills, to train, to grow and to develop, they will be actors whose role will be decisive in reducing the birth rate and population growth.

The virtues of closed, single-sex education are therefore twofold: on the

one hand, it enables girls to acquire disciplinary skills and eventually earn an income for themselves; on the other hand, it prevents them from becoming pregnant at an early age and avoids the risks of large families linked to early marriages, which are the main factor behind the unbridled demographic growth in our country today.

Our aim is to improve the quality of human capital resources and, therefore to develop and train teachers throughout their lives, hence the 23 per cent increase in sector budget. In addition, our processes for recruiting qualified trainers and teachers involve upgrading their status.

**DCR: What partnerships do you use in the field of education and how can development cooperation better help, whether North-South or South-South?**

**MB:** Our partnerships are both multilateral and bilateral. For example, on the multilateral front, the UNESCO Summit in Paris in May 2022 and the UN Summit in New York in September 2022 raised substantial funds, notably with BADEA, which financed one hundred (100) boarding schools in Niger. The Economic and Social Development Plan (PDES) has convinced EU partners such as France, the UK, Germany and Italy of the budgetary and financial viability of our education programme and our ambitions in the area of inclusive education. This has raised Niger's profile both globally (GPE), regionally and sub-regionally.

Our financial health means that, within the framework of the West African Economic and Monetary Union

(WAEMU), we have become a leader in the field of sectoral investments, and our technical and financial partners are constantly praising our actions, our efforts and our achievements. There is still a great deal to be done, but the momentum is there, and we can only be delighted. We now have to maintain our budgetary and economic growth at a difficult time in the global economy (war in Ukraine, inflation, rising transport costs, tightening of concessional credits, poor distribution of Special Drawing Rights for Africa, climate shock, pandemics, etc.).

The FAO and the WFP are international organisations that play an important role in providing logistical support for our education policies. The school canteens in the boarding schools (Kelle, among others) are fully supplied through a partnership between the WFP and the State of Niger, via its dedicated ministry, to provide the canteens with balanced and substantial food so that the boarding schools and girls' colleges are safe spaces. Girls' boarding schools are places where pupils can eat properly, relieving families of the worry about food assistance and the aftermath of famine in the event of a poor agricultural year or difficult rainy season. Water stress has had a severe impact on rural areas, and this aspect of schooling cannot be neglected. After all, all pupils need food, a healthy lifestyle and a safe environment if they are to study properly and progress in their learning.

The school environment is a place of socialisation and life, where traditional Nigerien values and positive Western

ideas of emancipation are truly put into practice and realised through specific educational activities. Our project is holistic: a school without energy, roads, food, health and hygiene cannot be viable. This means that the Ministries of Energy, Infrastructure, Transport, Agriculture, Livestock, Health, etc., are all involved in our concept of the school. It cannot be seen as a simple school building outside a framework, a context, a society, a rural environment, individuals and families with unique lives, specific cultures, and particular religious and social practices. We have to take all these parameters into account when educating our pupils and our children because we can't teach anything without motivating the children and working with the concerns of the pupils, who are the first to be involved in the learning process. This is not sufficiently reflected in the requests and offers made by donors; education cannot be improvised and requires substantial resources to produce concrete and lasting effects.

Partnerships must not be exclusively financial. In fact, it is the sinews of our war, and we made a timely reminder of this at the Paris Summit in June 2023 regarding North-South partnerships and financial balances in development aid. I mentioned the fact that we need more resources and financial aid as globalisation spreads across the African continent and that we are directly paying the heavy price of the debt policies and energy choices of the countries of the North and the inequalities in the international representative bodies that decide our present and our future. These

are inequalities and illogicalities that must be remedied as soon as possible if we are not to unbalance the world order, accentuate the processes of uncontrolled migration, and further impoverish the South.

It's not just a question of development aid but of clear-sighted political action in favour of the future of a global policy on well-being, health and children's rights, and therefore of harmony; because our Earth is one, Humanity is one, and despite our diversity and our contradictions, which are often complementary and very useful in stopping the excesses linked to speculative financial expansion, we have, South and North alike, common goods to protect: the quality of life, air, water, land and sustainable energy. This is why we are calling for synergy in multilateral funding and for rights of expression and focus in our partners' budget guidelines. In addition, we believe that bilateral dialogue is more appropriate for the education sector, depending on the skills and political histories of the countries that are helping us to develop our education policy: the countries of Northern Europe have an interesting approach to vocational and technical education, for example.

It should be added that a development aid strategy in the education sector is preferable to vast action programmes and budgetary support often provided by people and institutions cut off from the concrete reality experienced by our rural populations. That's why we recommend adapted and integrated schools, appropriate curricula, responsive trainers, up-to-date programmes, specific

teaching methods and in situ expertise, and we are working with Nigerien and international players to optimise skills and achieve our objectives of sustainable education and truly capitalise on the work done by human capital. I believe that Africa, and Niger in particular, must stop being a machine for manufacturing debt and ensuring imbalance on the pretext of its development. These paradigms no longer work. We can see this with the entry of other partners in financial aid, notably China, India and the countries of the Middle East, which are positively changing the societal landscapes and socio-economic realities of West Africa and Niger in particular.

**DCR: Niger has many partners. What do you think would be the ideal cooperation model?**

**MB:** A model of cooperation that is fair and rational, as much as true and authentic, would be one in which the partnership is ethical and equitable: aid would not be a form of economic blackmail and would not conceal silylline contracts that would further entrench the person being helped and would therefore be particularly favourable to the helper. Etymologically, cooperation means working together, i.e. being on the same level of information and intentions, with the same horizon of values and benevolence, as those that characterise responsible people despite the differences, the strong heterogeneities of autonomy and sovereignty between cooperating or cooperative countries. All too often, misery and poverty have meant the right to express oneself more or to speak out or carry more weight in international

negotiations. Niger is a country with real economic growth; there is much to be done and achieved. The urgency is total and ongoing in all sectors. It's 2023, and it's not right that our people should be lacking everything, when our subsoil is overflowing with wealth and the world is indulging in the luxury of expensive wars, for which we are directly paying the price. Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, JNIM and EIGS did not come to the Sahel spontaneously. Nor did the collapse of Libya cause security problems in the north of Niger, among other places, and we now have to pay the heavy price in terms of security and defence.

We need to talk about strategy rather than programmes if we are to achieve our objectives; similarly, we need more consultation, more round tables, and enough chairs around the table to represent the partners concerned, particularly African partners. Africa is not represented in international bodies (UN Security Council, OECD, WHO, etc.) even though it represents more than a third of humanity: is this normal?

The essence of multilateralism is dialogue and collaboration. The objectives can vary from local issues to global problems, as well as a multitude of challenges and opportunities. However, the methods must remain constant. Where does Africa stand in this highly unrepresentative context?

Networks, often referred to as committees, regularly bring together civil servants, ministers and other stakeholders to discuss various issues around "tables". These multi-stakeholder tables should help to build trust, facilitate mutual

understanding, harmonise interpretations of facts and trends, jointly examine solutions and share resources, knowledge and policy assessments.

Today, when the dialogue must focus on global phenomena and solutions that will benefit everyone, it must be universal. All countries must be involved on an equal footing, and all must contribute to paying the costs according to their capacities. Even in some cases, where a smaller "table" can help to explore complex and new issues and prepare proposals for a general decision, this "table" must be globally representative. This is not always the case at present, and certainly not the case for Africa.

Decolonisation should have encouraged the inclusion and participation of developing countries in the global decision-making process, but this has not often been the case. Admittedly, there are positive examples where the number of 'chairs' around the table has been appropriately increased. For example, in the early 1960s, the United Nations grew from 51 founding members to over 100, and in 1964 the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) was created to bring developing countries into the multilateral economic debate. However, other multilateral organisations have been less responsive to geopolitical changes. For example, the OECD did not include developing countries for a long time and still has no African members in the organisation, although its work has always had a significant impact beyond its member countries. Suffice it to mention the OECD's work on

development aid and risk assessment for export credits, not to mention its claim to set and disseminate global standards. I would add the G20 and Security Council: The demand for African participation or seats at the G20 'tables' as well as at the UN Security Council is better known, having been acclaimed by all, often, and for a long time.

Today, multilateral organisations can no longer ignore the powerful transformations taking place in the South. In addition to the consequences of decolonisation and the fall of the Iron Curtain, the world is experiencing a global change in economic geography. The multilateral framework must open up to new countries and new partners. As Macky Sall, when President of the African Union, pointed out at the Europe-Africa Summit, "Africa, which is in the throes of change, aspires to consensual and mutually beneficial partnerships; partnerships co-constructed on the basis of shared priorities and values, without civilisational injunction, exclusion or exclusivity". This statement by Macky Sall is important and demonstrates the shared thinking of others and of all Africans, especially as the African Union,

of a coordinated voice to defend Africa's interests.

The cooperation model must therefore be more ethical and more in touch with the realities of our countries: Africa is not a sub-continent and should, therefore, not be under-represented in institutions. Its civilisations, populations, cultures and world economy must not be denied to the extent that Niger cannot give its opinion and express its needs in education, as in other sectors.

The democratisation of international decision-making institutions is a prerequisite for fair, equitable, authentic and ethical cooperation. It is important to understand that our political intelligence and knowledge go beyond the strict framework of the accounting and financial economy that has led the world to the serious crises we are currently experiencing. Our wisdom and our trials have hardened us, and we can provide good advice for the smooth running of the world and for North-South relations. In this sense, Niger can be a country of expertise and good advice for States of goodwill when it comes to good governance and equity in intercontinental mutual aid.