

From the Classroom to the Field: The Realities of Development in West Africa

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“Everyone has a plan until they get punched in the mouth.” Those are the famous resounding words of former boxing heavyweight champion Mike “Iron Mike” Tyson. Unfortunately, they can be very synonymous to the harsh reality awaiting a young and recent graduate in the field of international development, even if warned, advised, and prepared by his or her faculty. However, the difficulties of the field are not limited to the young and inexperienced, as any seasoned international development veteran can confirm, because they are naturally intertwined with the realities of whatever context a development practitioner works in.

This is usually due to the fact that development in most developing parts of the world cannot be separated from political bureaucracies that are embedded in the culture of those places and the mentalities of the people living in them. I knew this to hold very true in West Africa, before coming back to Togo. This can be a shock to outsiders – mainly westerners - and hard to adjust to, but having been born and raised here (Togo) and having kept up with changes that have taken place in the country since I left, as good or bad or inexistent as they may have been, I was very prepared and knew what to expect from a development standpoint once I touched down from the U.S. I was familiar with Togolese people’s mentality and their perceptions of development. I thought I knew the reasons why.

In Togo, people have the strong tendency to associate development to great infrastructure and extravagant structures. I thought that it was because of the way the developed world was presented to the developing world. For example, through the lens of Hollywood, the West looks all futuristic with fast latest model cars, long and wide highways, skyscrapers, high rises, cool-looking buildings with escalators and cool elevators and revolving glass doors. Before I left Togo over a decade ago, these are things the average Togolese might have found in some of the big banks and international organizations in administrative zones in the capital or in its “luxurious” hotels along the coast. Thus, having more of these items and looking West-like is development to a lot of Togolese people. For four and a half years out of five (a presidential term), it’s not about the education system – all children having access to free primary education with teachers using the right material and getting paid adequately and regularly. It is not about health systems - hospitals operating under a great health system with affordable and accessible healthcare for all, provided by competent and available caregivers. It is not about social rights and services. According to popular perception, development is more about schools and hospitals being in big buildings with futuristic features.

Upon my return, I have come to realize that the perception has not widely changed as much as I had hoped. But then, part of the perception became somewhat more understandable as I started interning in one of those aforementioned banks and learning more about the way development is approached by DFI’s (Development Financing Institutions) in the sub-region. The internship was

at EBID (ECOWAS Bank of Investment and Development). ECOWAS is the Economic Community Of West African States; to a certain extent, it can be considered the West African version of the European Commission, given its initial vision to bring its sixteen (now fifteen) member states under a common institutional structure and push for free trade among them. EBID its financial branch, headquartered in Lomé, Togo, describes itself as being “an international financial institution with two funding windows to promote private sector activities and fund the development of the public sector... Overall, EBID aims to contribute to the economic development of West Africa through the financing of ECOWAS projects and programmes in particular, those related to transport, energy, telecommunications, industry, poverty alleviation, the environment and natural resources.”

Development as I knew it, taught by Arizona MDP with a heavy anthropological influence, had a strong focus on poverty alleviation, people and their livelihoods, their health, their environments, their natural resources. Sure, each school in the global MDP network has a different focus, orientation, or expertise but all approach development very similarly. DFI’s approach it a bit differently. EBID has committed to financing hundreds of projects. Each project is assigned to one of five sectors of intervention, namely industry, services, infrastructure, rural development, and the social sector.

As a product of the Arizona MDP my eyes lit up naturally when I saw “rural development” and “social sector”, thinking they would probably get a lot of attention and funding. I was wrong. In fact, well over 50% of their financing commitments go to fund the development of infrastructure throughout West Africa (electrical grids and interconnection, construction of interstate roads, water and sewage canals, digital coverage, etc.). All my “MDPeers” can imagine the look of shock on my face upon seeing a pie chart of the financial commitments by intervention sector showing, for example, a small and lonely 68% in the big infrastructure slice, and the 4% and 2% that were, respectively, just too big to fit into the rural development and social sector slivers.

So I asked why infrastructure gets significantly more financing than the other five intervention sectors. My supervisor, a macroeconomist, told me that it is the most important one. When I persisted with questions to understand why rural development gets so little love and how people manage their livelihoods, or get healthcare while these big interstates, electrical grids and digital coverage are being built, I expected a great and detailed and well informed response, because I know and understand that these are all things that can actually help. I was wrong again. He simply said: “without roads and electrical grid and water and sewage canalizations, we cannot get to those people you are worried about and effectively help them”. From his responses, and after going through more of the Bank’s activities, I realized that it is a financial institution above all, that needs to look out for its own interests.

The completion of a lot of these same infrastructure projects has certainly wooed a lot of the people, who in Lomé, believed that looking like the West means development. As a matter of fact, a lot of people have praised how much Lomé has changed because they now have better or new roads. Though it makes business sense for the bank to favor and value infrastructure projects, I still do not understand the perception that they are a good barometer for how developed the country has become. Luckily, we are in that six months homestretch leading up to,

so the government can keep taking pride in and pointing out all of these “grands travaux” (Great Projects) that it undertook, while the population actually points out real development issues dealing with people’s livelihoods, health, education, etc.

I would like to reassure everyone, that none of this is to say that the Arizona MDP way of development in me is dying. No sir, that is far from the reality. With climate change and environmental issues being the big talk in development and the world, even DFI’s have changed their approach a bit to protect the environment and the people. Along with environmental criteria, DFI’s have had to pay greater attention to many social conditions that they have to meet in order to implement projects. EBID has followed suit; but there is a lot of room for progress. My time in EBID’s Department of Research and Strategic Planning has come to an end, but I am now moving to the Unit of Environment and Sustainable Development. In the near future, this is where I see the Arizona MDP in me shining. This is my way of reconciling, at least for my own peace of mind, the investment-yield approach to development with the Arizona MPD way of development, which the great Tim Finan, one of its co-directors simply sums up as “the act of love”.