

ACBF: The quiet helper

There is an African organisation which has been doing good work on the continent for almost 20 years now, but not many people know it. Now you know – it is called the African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). In partnership with the African Development Bank, the ACBF organised an “African heads of state high-level forum on building capacity in post-conflict countries” in Tunisia last month. **Baffour Ankomah** was there and sent us this report.



Below: President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso speaks on the second day of the ACBF's forum in Tunisia. To his left is the AfDB president, Dr Donald Kaberuka

membership fees, the ACBF knows no such frustrations.

Perhaps it is because of the “mission” and “vision” it was assigned at its founding: “To build sustainable human and institutional capacity for poverty reduction in Africa”, and “to become the leading African institution in partnership with stakeholders to build sustainable capacity for good governance and poverty reduction.”

Key roles

Since its founding, the ACBF has been playing five main roles: (1) Building and strengthening sustainable indigenous capacity for development policy formulation and management throughout sub-Saharan Africa; (2) Improving through co-financing and other networking arrangements, the channelling of donor support for capacity building; (3) Contributing to programmes for the reversal of the brain drain in Africa and encouraging retention as well as intensive utilisation of existing capacity; (4) Building capacity in key areas of the public sector and fostering the interface between the public sector, the

ACBF's current membership is quite impressive. It has 47 full members, made up of four international development institutions – AfDB, UNDP, the World Bank and IMF – and 43 African and other countries, namely: Benin, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Canada, Central African Republic, Chad, Congo-Brazzaville, Congo-DRC, Côte d'Ivoire, Denmark, Djibouti, France, Gabon, Ghana, Greece, India, Ireland, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Netherlands, Niger, Nigeria, Norway, Rwanda, São Tomé & Príncipe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Sudan, Swaziland, Sweden, Tanzania, Uganda, the UK, the USA, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. The African Union (AU) is an honorary member.

making them professional.

The organisation is currently headed by Dr Frannie Léautier as executive secretary. A Tanzanian national of high academic and professional standing, Dr Léautier served as vice president of the World Bank and head of the World Bank Institute from December 2001 to March 2007. Between 2000 and 2001, she was the chief of staff to the president of the World Bank; thus cumulatively, Léautier served in various capacities at the World Bank from 1992-2007.

With such pedigree at the ACBF, and a professional staff from across the continent committed to improving Africa's human capital, the organisation should not be an “AC what?!”

People like the current AfDB president, Dr Donald Kaberuka, who was Rwanda's finance and economic planning minister between 1997-2005, attest to the immense capacity and wherewithal that the ACBF brings to needy and post-conflict countries.

When most donors and organisations would not look at Rwanda for a minute soon after the 1994 genocide that killed an estimated one million people and dispersed much of the rest of the human capital outside the country, it was the ACBF that became the first organisation to arrive in Rwanda with much-needed help in the area of capacity building.

The organisation worked closely with Finance Minister Kaberuka to establish systems to recruit, build, and train the needed manpower that set Rwanda on the road to recovery.

Today Dr Kaberuka is widely acknowledged as the principal architect of Rwanda's successful post-war reconstruction and economic reform programme. As finance and economic planning minister, he initiated and implemented major economic and governance reforms in the fiscal, monetary, budgetary and structural domains, including the independence of Rwanda's central bank. These reforms gave birth to Rwanda's current widely acclaimed recovery and sustained economic growth.

At the “African heads of state high-level forum on building capacity in post-conflict countries” jointly organised by the ACBF and AfDB in the Tunisian capital, Tunis, on 23-24 March, Dr Kaberuka was humble and generous enough to give “the

It is amazing that an African organisation can do such good work while being little known outside its own circles. The African Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF) will be 20 years old on 9 February 2011 but if you ask most Africans if they have ever heard of the organisation, chances are that the most charitable answer you will get will be: “AC what?” But it is surely not “Milan”. AC Milan may be a leading football club in Italy and Europe, but Africa's AC is bigger and comes with a BF attached.

The ACBF is based in the Zimbabwean capital, Harare. It is an independent, continental, capacity-building organisation established on 9 February 1991 through the collaborative efforts of African governments, bilateral donors, and three multilateral institutions – the African Development Bank (AfDB), the World Bank, and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). It was established as a response to the severity of Africa's capacity problem at the time and the challenge to invest in the continent's indigenous human capital and institutions.

A good 70% of the ACBF's finances come from the World Bank, 5% from membership fees, and the remainder from AfDB and the non-African members.

If your country is not a member, you had better phone your president and kindly ask him to join. For, because of the ACBF's good work over the last two decades, it has the privilege of being the only major African continental organisation whose diverse members are happy enough to pay up their dues and more besides. While the AU has been struggling for years with non-payment or arrears of

“We couldn't have achieved what we have in Rwanda today without the ACBF,” says Dr Kaberuka, the principal architect of Rwanda's post-war reconstruction programme.”

development process, the private sector and civil society; and (5) Providing support (financial and otherwise) for regional initiatives in the area of regional integration and research training.

Currently, the organisation is involved in 233 projects and programmes in 44 African countries, covering six core areas: economic policy analysis and management; financial management and accountability; national statistics and statistical systems; public administration and management; national parliaments and parliamentary institutions; and strengthening the voices of the private sector and civil society and

highest credit” for Rwanda’s recovery to the ACBF, “without whom we couldn’t have achieved what we have achieved in Rwanda today”.

The “high-level forum” was held to coincide with an ACBF’s extraordinary board of governors meeting and also to herald the organisation’s 20th anniversary celebrations. It was attended, among others, by President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso, Dr Donald Kaberuka, other high-ranking African and international speakers, the ACBF board of governors, diplomats and heads of international organisations in Tunisia, government officials and the staff of both the AfDB and ACBF. The objective of the forum was to draw and focus the attention of the African people and development partners on the importance of adopting innovative solutions to the challenges of capacity building in fragile and post-conflict countries on the continent. Thus, peer learning and experience sharing on capacity development in Africa, and the role of national leadership in shaping the development agenda, formed an important aspect of the discussions.

Liberia’s experience

Speaking at the forum via video recording, Liberia’s president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, who could not attend due to other engagements in Spain, said the ideals of the ACBF at its founding in 1991 remained relevant today.

“Africa is in competition with the rest of humanity in today’s increasingly globalised and complex world,” the president said. “Information technology, while making the human experience easier to share, poses a further challenge. If our continent is to remain on the cutting edge, we must develop, attract, and retain our best and brightest professionals on the one hand, and we must build, nurture, preserve, and strengthen our institutions on the other.”

A former executive board member of the ACBF herself, President Johnson-Sirleaf said the organisation was “very important to me and to Africa’s development. I recall, with fond memories, my own previous tenure on the Board... As the ACBF approaches its 20th anniversary, this is a time for reflection on the milestones achieved, the current state of the Foundation, and the challenges that



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lie ahead.”

Sharing the “Liberian experience” with the forum, President Johnson-Sirleaf said the loss of human resources due to war had a devastating effect on the country. “Like other post-conflict countries, we have had to take extraordinary steps to reverse the ‘brain drain’, thereby engendering reconciliation, reform, and reconstruction.

“Through our Senior Executive Service (SES) programme, we are able to attract some of Liberia’s best and brightest to careers in the civil and public service. These professionals, recruited at home and from the Diaspora, are now acting as change agents and are strategically placed in ministries and agencies where they are taking the lead in implementing the government’s development agenda, our Poverty Reduction Strategy.”

Even though the jury is out, a key lesson already learned in Liberia’s post-conflict experience, according to the president, is that sustainable capacity development for post-conflict countries requires a multi-pronged approach. Thus Liberia has several such programmes running concurrently.

“While these programmes address immediate capacity development,” President Johnson-Sirleaf said, “the Liberia Institute for Public Administration and the Liberia Macroeconomic Policy Analysis Capacity Building Project, supported by the ACBF, are institutions established to address medium- and

long-term capacity development.

“Together these programmes, funded with help from our development partners and from our own resources, are our response to the immediate human and institutional capacity challenges that we face in our transition from war to peace...”

Other experiences

President Blaise Compaoré of Burkina Faso agreed that capacity building in post-conflict countries remained a veritable challenge, and countries coming out of civil war or other conflicts need help, some of it specific, to rebuild not only human capacity but other resources in order to meet the needs of their populations. Within the African context, President Compaoré said, it was necessary that the continent took collective action to respond to the challenges posed by the loss of human capital in post-conflict countries.

In the run-up to the forum, the AfDB president Dr Donald Kaberuka had urged Africa to do more in capacity building.

“Weak capacity in public and private sectors in Africa is acknowledged as a major impediment to the attainment of poverty reduction goals on the continent,” Dr Kaberuka said. “It is therefore evident that no matter the amount of financial resources mobilised for Africa’s development, such funds would yield limited or modest results in post-conflict countries if a particular emphasis is not put into re-

building the state and restoring its capacity to deliver its core functions.”

Post-conflict countries, according to Dr Kaberuka, should therefore make efforts at enhancing their capacities by establishing solid institutions. The AfDB will assist them in this, through budget support, the African Development Institute, and instruments such as the Bank’s Fragile State Facility.

“Through the rebuilding of capacity, the AfDB will contribute in building their institutions so that the countries can transform their natural resources from a curse into a blessing,” Dr Kaberuka added.

Last year, the AfDB approved over \$1bn to be used by its Fragile State Facility instrument to help qualifying countries in Africa. Every year the Bank spends over \$20m on supporting capacity building on the continent. Dr Kaberuka’s sentiments were shared wholeheartedly by the ACBF’s Dr Frannie Léautier. “Building capacity in post-conflict countries,” she said, “starts with ensuring that the state can provide an enabling environment and space for re-establishing critical functions and infrastructure, the regeneration of skills and the maintenance of peace for the achievement of sustainable development.

“The ACBF’s experience in supporting capacity development in fragile and post-conflict environments has shown that it is possible to effectively combine the strategy of strengthening the regulatory functions of the state and developing the organisations needed for service delivery at the same time.”

According to Dr Léautier: “ACBF interventions in post-conflict countries have

uncovered key challenges that must be tackled when developing capacity. These include severe gaps in leadership, particularly leaders who can inspire and create a shared vision of the future and stitch the preferences of diverse groups.

“Post-conflict countries also have a shortage of skilled individuals to implement projects and programmes. Critical actions are needed at an early stage to augment the capacity of the state to transform emergency planning, through the transitory medium planning phase, to long-term planning and priority setting.

“Focusing on the interface between the private sector, civil society and government is critical in this regard, as is the need to build the capacities needed to move from a humanitarian phase to a development phase... This is why we need to seek smoother coordination amongst development partners involved in capacity development in post-conflict countries.”

Discussions

The “high-level forum” in Tunis was held over two days. The first day, 23 March, saw a panel discussion on “building capacity in post-conflict countries”. The panellists consisted of Dr Emmanuel Akwetey, executive director of the Institute for Democratic Governance based in Ghana; Dr Poul Engberg-Pedersen, director general of the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation; Dr Gabriel Negatu, director of governance at the AfDB; Dr Bernard Nzo-Nguty, an international consultant on governance from Cameroon; and Kristina Svesson, former Swedish

Far left: Dr Donald Kaberuka and right, Dr Frannie Léautier, who is leading a committed group of ACBF professionals recruited from across Africa to help Africa

ambassador to Malawi, Mauritius, Zambia and Zimbabwe. In his contribution, Dr Poul Pedersen made a telling comment which most Africans, in our haste to have a perfect democratic environment, often overlook. “Political leadership is a craft,” Dr Pedersen said. “Africans should not be impatient. It took Europe centuries to learn this craft. Africa is improving all the time – a good example is Malawi after President Banda. Malawi held some strange elections in Banda’s days, but today, 20 years on, political discourse is at a much higher level in the country.”

This fact – “Africa is improving all the time” – is often lost in the mad rush to have a “developed Africa” overnight. As such the impression is often created that Africa has been marking time over the decades, which is not the case. The continent is improving all the time, even though problems still exist. But which continent has no problems? That notwithstanding, Dr Emmanuel Akwetey made the point that Africa needed to build its capacity for dialogue and consensus, and then implement what is decided. “Politicians not agreeing among themselves is a major source of instability in our societies. They should do the right things, especially in post-conflict countries, to ensure that conflict does not happen again,” he said.

Dr Akwetey regretted the fact that “outsiders helping in post-conflict countries tend to be very impatient, for example the UN and bilateral countries. They come in and want to do very short-term things. This tells us to use pan-African institutions that understand the issues in post-conflict countries and won’t run away.”

In a post-forum interview with *New African*, Dr Léautier expressed delight at the outcome of the discussions in Tunis. Asked why the ACBF has been successful since its founding, she said it was due to multiple reasons, some of which were the strong support they have received, and continue to receive, from the AfDB; and the fact that “we don’t impose solutions or models. Africa should evolve its own models of governance and democracy. We bring trust.” ■ NA