Engaging with Africa's Newest Nation: AfDB in South Sudan

By Abdul Kamara, AfDB Resident Representative in Sudan

South Sudan hoisted its sovereign national flag on Saturday 9 July, 2011, marking its independence from the Republic of Sudan and the birth of a new nation. Its 8.2 million people had waited for the moment for a long time.

The proclamation of independence gave Africa’s 54th and newest nation full autonomy over its social, political and economic affairs, including the management of its resources. Among these are notably oil and fertile agricultural land.

Many have ascribed the country’s prevailing high poverty levels—over 52 percent of the South Sudan’s population live below the poverty line—to recurrent wars and civil strife, which prevented productive, large-scale tillage of agricultural land. Furthermore, under the previous political dispensation, the South Sudanese did not have full autonomy over their oil resources.

The emergence of South Sudan as a new nation state last week will, hopefully, help quell North-South political tensions, and serve as an impetus to reconciliation among the various socio-political and ethnic factions.

A South Sudan free of the tensions and armed clashes of the past will open up opportunities for large parts of the rural economy to benefit from various international development interventions from donors. Major development agencies, including the African Development Bank (AfDB), have been active in the region for years—some with targeted and intensified activities in the last few years.

As it looks at both the opportunities for South Sudan to build itself into a prosperous nation, as well as the country’s challenges, the African Development Bank is particularly aware of the capacity gaps in various government institutions and sectors—both in the central government and at the state level.

Filling these capacity gaps is particularly crucial for the emergence of accountable and functional institutions. It is important to build a critical mass of human and technical capacity in order to carry out the core state administrative functions, and administer donor-financed projects and programs.

In short, after the celebration of independence comes the time to build a workable nation-state, with all the legislative, governmental, fiscal, administrative and organizational processes that this task implies.
Fortunately, there are already some mechanisms in place in South Sudan to smooth the path.

These include the South Sudan Development Plan (SSDP), the forthcoming South Sudan Integrated Fiduciary Assessment (SSIFA), and the African Union High Level Implementation Panel (AUHIP).

The SSDP was one of the outcomes of a nationwide household poverty survey, initiated in 2007 throughout the north and south of Sudan, as part of a capacity building, poverty reduction and good governance project, to which the AfDB donated USD 15 million.

It was the first such survey undertaken in 30 years, and generated valuable data and analysis for policy processes. It is a unique source of reliable household data on which the new state can rely for its policy planning.

The same project trained some 500 civil servants in the ten states of South Sudan, in the key areas of public finance management and administration, policy planning and pro-poor budgeting. Also, ten technical experts (one in each state) were seconded for a period of one year. The project is currently financing the construction of a civil service training centre in Juba.

The acute shortage of a trained and qualified civil service creates an urgent need to train a critical mass of experts in the areas of fiduciary management, auditing, accounting, taxation, and resource mobilization.

The success of the secondment program prompted the Canadian Government to finance about 150 UN Volunteers to be seconded to the ten states. A broader program to second some 1,000 civil servants to South Sudan (from neighbouring states) is being prepared by the UN and the GoSS.

The SSIFA seeks to identify critical weaknesses in the Public Finance Management and proposes ways of addressing them. A number of international institutions are supporting its preparation, including the AfDB, the World Bank, USAID and the United Nations Development Programme.

As far as the AUHIP is concerned, the AfDB has provided technical support, especially in the area of cooperation between the two states over debt and oil-related issues.

Further analytical work is planned in the areas of the political economy, poverty and inequality, cross-border trade, and regional integration.