

French aid and the crisis of higher education in Francophone Africa

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Introduction

The 20 Francophone countries located in Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) together had 255,000 tertiary students in 1990, a near sevenfold increase since 1970 when only 37,000 were enrolled. During the two first post-independence decades, all were assured of a civil servant position because of the acute shortage of trained nationals during colonial rule. Although this is no longer the case, surprisingly, the basic characteristics of tertiary education systems have not significantly changed to cope with a radically new context for the graduates.

The background and characteristics of the Francophone model

A large majority of Francophone tertiary education systems in SSA have adopted an organisational model close to the French one, but some differences have also been introduced. A common basic principle is the absence of *numerus clausus*: all pupils who have passed the final secondary education examination, the 'baccalaureat', are entitled to enter a university department of their choice. Such a system is entirely demand-driven, and the vast majority of students and their families strongly believe that this opportunity is an untouchable right, not open to social or public arbitrage. Any attempt to reconsider this right can cause immediate social protest which few governments are ready to face.

This feeling is even stronger in SSA countries because of the social benefits which used to be associated with university enrolment, namely a quasi automatic scholarship and subsidized lodging and feeding facilities. Higher education is considered less as a private investment than as an economic reward or gain in itself. The university student status does not generate opportunity costs such as foregone earnings, but immediately accessible income. Needless to add, all baccalaureat holders are interested in having this opportunity.

A second difference to French universities is size: the average university size in France is about 15,000 students, while it is less than half that number in SSA. This despite the fact that each university in SSA is supposed to cover all academic fields, from the humanities to the natural sciences, from law to economics, and from medicine to technology. This leads to small groups of students within specific fields, in particular the sciences and mathematics, and during the final years, particularly the third and fourth year. In many cases, classes for first year students are overcrowded and, due to low internal efficiency, only a handful of students attend third and fourth year lectures.

The question of size may explain a third difference, namely the pupil/teacher ratio. By international standards, the French model is characterized by rather high rates, i.e. more than 20 students per teacher, while in SSA universities it is around 14 students per

Figure 1: *Comparative characteristics of French universities and French 'Grandes Ecoles'*

Characteristics	Universities	French 'Grandes Ecoles'
Hierarchical position	inferior	superior (for the elite)
Size	large (> 10,000 students)	small (< 1,000 students)
Field coverage	multiple	unique
Entrance conditions	open	numerus
Resources	limited	
Access to job market	unwarranted	
Apparent internal efficiency	weak	
Management authority	Ministry of Education	

32,000. The unit cost in 'Grandes Ecoles' is two to three times higher than in universities, ranging from FRF 64,000 to 96,000. No data are available for the SSA 'Ecoles Inter-Etats', but unlike French 'Grandes Ecoles' they are facing increasing budgetary constraints and the possibility that several of them could be closed in the near future due to lack of sponsors.

The decline in educational resources is often attributed to the policies imposed by some international financial organisations, in particular the Bretton Woods ones, in relation to structural adjustment programmes. However, it is difficult to estimate the real impact of these programmes on educational expenditure because of declining domestic fiscal resources. Some countries, such as Zaire and Nigeria, have rejected structural adjustment programmes but have cut educational expenditures even more drastically than countries which have accepted the programmes.

During the two first decades after independence (1960-80) and in a context of stronger faith in state intervention in the economy than is now the case, both universities and 'Ecoles Inter-Etats' succeeded in training new local specialists in different fields of public services and administration. Problems began to arise in the 1980s when fiscal resources were insufficient to cover continuous growth of public expenditure and, thereby, ensure that new graduates were recruited every year, while keeping those already recruited because they were too young to retire.

The problems faced by tertiary education institutions were, and still are, twofold: given the present conditions of the job market in the region, the rate of unemployed graduates is constantly increasing, and the budgetary constraints of sponsors create a severe financial crisis within most universities and 'Ecoles Inter-Etats'. If market conditions were prevailing, one should have observed a decline in the demand for higher education. However, this has not occurred because, for a majority of students in Francophone SSA, higher education is not generating costs but income, thanks to the counter-incentive scholarship system associated with subsidized lodging and food services.

As a consequence, the quality of educational services provided by both universities and 'Ecoles Inter-Etats' has severely suffered from the lack of funds for key pedagogical inputs, especially those which have to be imported: books, textbooks, journals, scientific equipment, spare parts for existing equipment, computers and related software, electronic networking for scientific communication, funds for attending scientific meetings, etc. Furthermore, the contribution of SSA higher education systems to the production of new knowledge has virtually disappeared: doctoral programmes in universities and 'Ecoles Inter-Etats' are almost non-existent, and publication of scientific articles by African professors in refereed journals remains at a very insignificant level. This is the result of a vicious circle: the best students trained in SSA institutions tend to move to Western universities in order to prepare their PhD and do not contribute to the upgrading of the scientific capacity of SSA universities. Furthermore, because of the deteriorating quality of SSA universities, the best PhD holders

seek academic positions not in their countries of origin, but elsewhere, in particular in Europe, North America and international organisations, thus withdrawing the most talented and promising elements from SSA universities.

The relationship between France and Francophone SSA universities

Since independence, France has generously supported the development of new universities in the region. It has provided thousands of professors and other teaching staff, scholarships for students and young staff seeking PhDs, books, equipment and teaching materials. The bulk of French aid has always been technical assistance, mostly teaching staff, even if this has tended to decrease in the recent past.

Few hard data are available to describe the basic characteristics of French assistance in this field. The only comprehensive studies have been produced by Millot, Orivel and Rasera (1987) and by Sergent (1993), covering the years 1981-83 and 1984-86, respectively. During these six years, aid to education in SSA remained more or less constant. Annual direct support to Sub-Saharan educational systems represented about US\$ 700 million. Overseas for Africa

of French aid each year. This is considerably below that of the 1960s and 1970s when a smaller number of students were enrolled in SSA universities. While the number of students in tertiary education has multiplied by seven during the past 20 years, French aid has not followed suit. On the contrary, since the mid-1980s, France has progressively withdrawn the *cooperants* working in SSA and introduced, as will be discussed below, new modes of assistance. At its peak, French technical assistance reached more than 8,000 *cooperants*. It has been progressively reduced at a pace of 300 per year, in 1994 amounting to 4,000. Of these, 1,200 are assigned to tertiary education, approximately 700 in universities and 500 in professional tertiary level schools, including in 'Ecoles Inter-Etats'.

According to a recent study on SSA education (DAE 1994), per student expenditure in tertiary education in Francophone Africa was about US\$ 4,600 in 1970, US\$ 3,300 in 1980 and US\$ 2,400 in 1990. Thus, over 20 years resources per student have been almost reduced by half with an absolute reduction of US\$ 2,200. French aid has not compensated for this drastic decline but has, in fact, been substantially reduced. In 1980, for instance, Francophone SSA countries enrolled only 149,000 students for whom French assistance amounted to US\$ 80 million or US\$ 540 per student. It is significantly less today, and no alternative financial source has substituted for the decline.

This declining trend is linked to three basic changes which have been progressively introduced in French assistance policy concerning education:

1. a reduction in the proportion of technical assistance in favour of other modes of intervention. According to Millot, Orivel and Rasera (1987), in the early 1980s technical assistance represented 82% of French aid compared to 43% for all donors together. The reduction in the number of *cooperants* will necessarily lead to a further reduction of this proportion;
2. a new effort to support primary education which was excessively neglected in the 1980s. As the total amount of direct French aid to education is not increasing, this new emphasis on basic education partly takes place at the expense of higher education;
3. a development of non-sectoral interventions in the form of general budgetary support either to reduce the budget deficit when fiscal resources are no longer sufficient to pay civil servant salaries (including those for teachers) or to reduce the public debt since debt reduction eases the public budget and gives more flexibility to pay civil servant salaries. This third mode of intervention is not reflected in data related to the amount of aid allocated to education and actual aid is, therefore, somewhat underestimated. When a grant is allocated to the general budget, its beneficiaries are not clearly identified, but one can assume that education is supported proportionally to its relative share of the total budget.

The changes in French aid policy are dictated by two considerations: helping recipient countries to face urgent needs during a period of severe economic crisis; and promoting priorities which have been identified in many studies, in particular Education for All. While these changes should be supported, it must also be understood how potentially negative their impact can be on the amount of French aid for tertiary education in Francophone SSA.

Attempts to improve effectiveness of French aid to tertiary education

Changes in the traditional approaches of French cooperation regarding education in Francophone SSA require a substantial amount of political commitment since they touch upon long established interests of various influencing lobbies. It is widely recognized that the proportion of technical assistance is excessive, but its reduction is limited by two opposing forces: the union of technical assistants who enjoy some benefit from this status which they lose when returning to France; and the recipient countries which find technical assistants useful as long as the countries do not have to bear any opportunity costs. They do not pay for them and they are not offered an alternative form of aid to compensate for the withdrawal of the technical assistants.

In spite of these opposing forces, there is a determined French policy to reduce substantially, although progressively, its aid in terms of technical assistance. The total amount of aid allocated to education does not seem to be on the decline, but aid for higher education may be shrinking. Previous support for technical assistance is instead directed to basic education and general budget support, while most universities feel that they receive a smaller amount of direct aid.

To make this policy more acceptable to technical assistants and their union, the return to France of university staff is better prepared than before. Rather than having a work contract linking the technical assistant directly with the Ministry of Cooperation, the technical assistant is a regular staff member of a French university which grants him/her leave for three years, during which he/she is assigned to an African university paid by the Ministry of Cooperation. At the end of the three-year period, he/she goes back to the former position at the university in France.

This system will progressively deplete the existing stock of technical assistants who used to consider their assignment as a career in itself. It was common to have successive positions in different countries until retirement age. Generally, such careers were financially more attractive than similar academic careers in French universities. Furthermore, those who wanted to come back to France before their retirement had difficulty in finding a teaching position in a metropolitan university because of the low reputation of African academia, especially from a research point of view.

This new approach is complemented by a rationalization of relations between French universities and their African counterparts. Instead of providing African universities with means to cover their needs for specialists, short-term professors, and scholarships for stays in French universities, general cooperative and contractual agreements between a French and an African university are encouraged, supervised and financed by the Ministry of Cooperation. Relations are therefore less diversified but more continuous, allow for a deeper partnership, and force French universities to define a real cooperation policy at the university level, not at the individual faculty staff member level.

A second new mode of intervention was introduced in 1987 under the name CAMPUS, 'Cooperation avec l'Afrique et Madagascar pour la Promotion Universitaire et Scientifique'. This programme aims at promoting research projects in Francophone universities with the partnership of French research institutions. To have access to CAMPUS, a project must include the training of African researchers and focus on development objectives. About 15 projects are financed each year averaging the amount of FRF 750,000 or about US\$ 140,000.

The scholarship policy is also affected by certain changes. The annual flow of scholarships to students from SSA is about 5,000. During the early independence years, the bulk of scholarships was allocated to undergraduate students for enrolment in a French university. This policy has progressively been changed as local universities began to offer similar academic specializations. In principle, no scholarship can be granted to a student who can

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The limitations of French assistance to higher education in SSA

In spite of some positive changes in the recent past due to a better understanding of desirable educational policies in the region, French cooperation could be improved in many respects. First of all, as for many other bilateral donors, French assistance is affected by certain political biases. Efforts aimed at improving the effectiveness of aid are often overturned by political lobbying at the highest levels both from the French side and from the recipient side. Therefore, management of technical assistance is not dictated purely by efficiency considerations, but also by favouritism, nepotism, and the like. It is more likely that a scholarship will be granted to a relative of a local minister than to a deserving son of a farmer. Similarly, the assignment of technical assistants is the combined result of identified needs, the relative capacity of the staff to perform the desired task, the necessity to find positions for those who do not have the required qualifications for new objectives but who have some right to be maintained as technical assistants, and personal relations with the political power of the moment.

One could say that this kind of behaviour is 'human'. However, French assistance is often trying to promote French economic interests which do not coincide with the long-term interests of the recipient country. One example of this is printed education materials. After more than thirty years of independence, the proportion of locally produced textbooks in Francophone SSA remains too small and the publishing capacity of SSA too weak. The availability of textbooks is inferior today compared to any previous period, and the prices of textbooks have increased significantly compared to the GDP (gross domestic

from the recipient countries. Urgent reforms are needed in order to improve two major issues: a growing inconsistency between the number of graduates per field and the realities of the job market which implies that access to higher education is no longer demand-driven, but more (job) supply-driven. This means that some kind of regulation at the entrance level should replace the unlimited right of baccalaureat holders to enrol in universities. Secondly, the unbalanced allocation of resources between pedagogical and social purposes should be corrected. Per student expenditure may not increase significantly in the foreseeable future, and the supply of badly needed pedagogical inputs can only be met by reducing unnecessary 'social expenditure'.

Such reforms should be accompanied by greater diversification of higher education institutions in the region in terms of fields, vocationalisation and academic excellence. Such a diversification implies a greater sense of regional cooperation and complementary initiatives. The same low quality institutions should not be duplicated everywhere. Instead, national and international coherent and coordinated efforts should be concentrated on certain regional institutions of excellence in order to preserve the chance of having SSA be academically recognized in the next century.

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