

History and Context of Development in West Africa

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Terms of reference for a Commissioned Paper

The quest for development, broadly understood as cumulative, all-round, and integrated progress, is integral to all societies and peoples. If this assertion is true, it follows that underdevelopment is not, therefore, the natural fate of any peoples or nations. Rather, it is the product of historical factors which need to be unraveled and redressed in order for progress to be registered. In West Africa, the quest for development has a long historical antecedent, going back to the earliest experiments in the area at building political communities that could serve as workable, legitimate frameworks for aggregating, securing and extending the wealth of society and the welfare of the citizenry. These experiments knew periods of relative success and periods of setback and failure. The experiments also went through different stages that were marked as much by continuities as by disruptions and ruptures. The contextual factors at play at different moments in the developmental quest have also been varied, interacting among themselves in different ways, and ranging from the political, economic, and social to the cultural, environmental, and demographic. As West Africa's contacts with and position in the world economy evolved, the sub-region has also known periods in its history when development was either more endogenous or internally-driven and exogenous or externally-driven.

It is remarkable that much of the contemporary efforts at capturing and explaining the state of development in West Africa are often both static and ahistorical. As the lead paper that would be delivered to flag-off the ECOWAS symposium, this paper should make a conscious push at redressing this methodological gap by locating efforts at promoting development in West Africa in a historical flow that seeks to understand the present by looking back into past experiences, processes and contexts. The author of the paper is encouraged to periodise the history of development in West Africa with reference to the dominant contextual issues at play at different moments. The key factors that have weighed on development in the sub-region, including the outcomes registered and future prospects, should be clearly identified. The leading historical actors influencing and shaping the content and direction of development in the sub-region should also be assessed. The dominant philosophical orientations, political visions and ideological considerations that influenced the policy choices made at different points in time should also be spelt out as should the actual impact which the policies implemented had on growth, welfare and development.

The paper should also consider the key lessons of history for West Africa's on-going quest to overcome problems of underdevelopment with which it is still grappling. It should outline the possible alternative futures that await the countries of the sub-region a rapidly globalised world in which international factors play as considerable a role as domestic ones in determining development outcomes. Participants at the symposium would expect that the paper would address the following salient questions: What are the

contours and dimensions of the crises of development facing the countries of West Africa? What are the historical origins of these crises? What responses have been developed over time to overcome these crises and how successful have they been? What were the factors that underpinned phases or periods of relative success or failure in the West African quest for development? What are the lessons which West Africa could learn from its history, including the history of the quest for development, in order to overcome the challenges it is confronted with and build a more promising future for the citizenry?