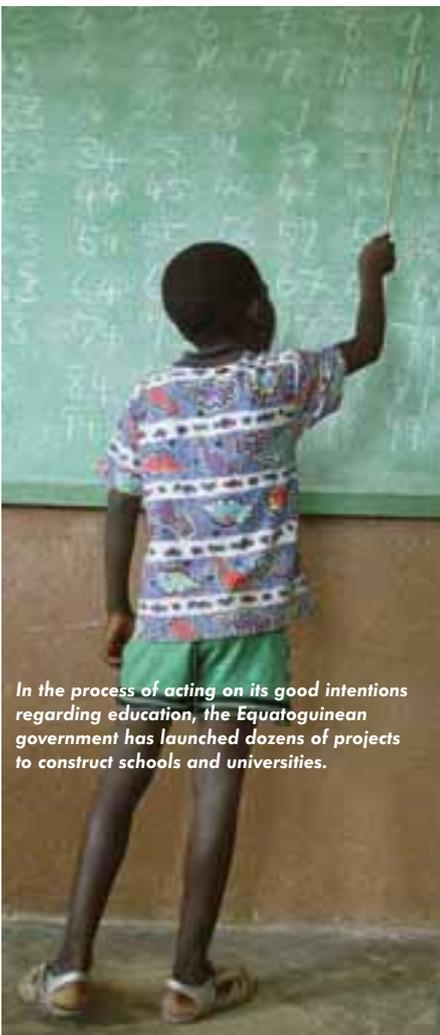


THE IMPOSSIBLE DREAM OF BUILDING STATE-OF-THE-ART UNIVERSITIES

Yesterday ranked among the least developed countries, today an oil power, Equatorial Guinea cherishes new ambitions concerning education. The future, or at least the path to development, also lies in that direction.



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AFP

It was President Teodoro Obiang Nguema himself who set the tone. In its quest for international recognition, Malabo wants to create an image for itself as a pole of academic excellence. And to put words into action, during the 17th summit of the African Union last July, the Equatoguinean President personally laid the first stone for a future

African Observatory of Science, Technology and Innovation. By this symbolic and meaningful gesture, Malabo is clearly signaling its ambition to play a larger role on the continental chessboard in the development of scientific research and education. Indeed, Equatorial Guinea is providing what it has to give: financing of USD 3.6 million and the land for the project. The builders of the Observatory will be Chinese, French, Turkish or Moroccan. As for the technicians, researchers and support staff, they will be sent by all African countries. The Observatory's stated objective is to eradicate poverty, achieve sustainable development and ensure that Africans have the full capability of collecting data on Africa's scientific, technological and innovation capacities.

In Equatorial Guinea, the rate of university registration barely reaches 3% of the population. This relatively low percentage stands in contrast to the regional average: 8% in Cameroon and 7% in neighboring Gabon.

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In the process of acting on its good intentions regarding education, the Equatoguinean government has launched dozens of projects to construct schools and universities. Thus, in the future city of Oyala in the heart of Rio Muni, which should be home to 65,000 inhabitants, the education dimension has not been neglected. Its planned university campus will accommodate 10,000 students, at a university endowed with fourteen faculties: medicine, agriculture, engineering, construction, oil services, architecture, etc. Agreements are to be signed "with foreign universities, particularly in the United States, Europe and Latin America, whose instructors will come to teach courses and train teachers in Equatorial

Guinea, and where students of Oyala will be able to complete their studies," explains Serge Pereira, general director of Unicon. The university will also accept scholarship students from the sub-region. "We are negotiating with universities of Cameroon, Congo-Brazzaville and Gabon," Pereira notes. However, the university of Oyala will not be open to everyone who may wish to attend: students will be required to first attend a preparatory school that will select only the best among them.

This is therefore the new impossible dream of education that Malabo is hoping to make come true with revenues from the oil bonanza. It is also a good way to seek accreditation from the African and Malagasy Council of Higher Education (CAMES – Conseil africain et malgache de l'enseignement supérieur) for diplomas issued by these universities.

Even if the opposition looks askance at these construction projects, arguing that they serve to deceive the international community, it is still significant that the government

in power claim to have a sound investment policy. The government, which has no fondness for rebellious university campuses, has now promised to finish the job, after investing heavily in infrastructure: electricity, roads, water supply. It is another way to show where the oil money is going.

Other educational infrastructure – schools, high schools and technical institutes – are under construction. In parallel, the country is developing human resources training programs. A first class of 1,000 teachers and 122 doctors has already graduated. And others are due to follow.

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