

INTERVIEW

Turning dry Sahel into land of opportunity

— Ibrahim Thiaw, Special Adviser for the Sahel



SPECIAL FOCUS ON THE SAHEL

Ibrahim Thiaw of Mauritania was recently appointed the UN Secretary-General's special adviser for the Sahel. A former deputy executive director for UN Environment, Mr. Thiaw is now charged with, among other responsibilities, mobilising domestic and international support for the socioeconomic development of the Sahel region, which covers 10 African countries, according to the UN. In this interview for *Africa Renewal*, Mr. Thiaw spoke with **Minielle Baro** of the UN Information Centre in Dakar on his vision, the need for urgency and the significant investment opportunities in the Sahel. These are excerpts.

Africa Renewal: What is the scope of your mandate as the special adviser for the Sahel?

Mr. Thiaw: I work with all UN agencies to harmonize support for the Sahel region. The UN will have multiple roles through its various agencies, funds and programmes. One is to provide expertise, the second is to mobilize international partners and institutions, including the private sector, and help coordinate action and bring a coherent response to the multiple challenges that the Sahel is facing. The third role is to highlight the immense business potential in the Sahel and to promote sustainable development in the region.

Why is the UN deploying a special adviser for the Sahel?

To coordinate the work of the UN system and to facilitate the cooperation between the different agencies working on the Sahel support plan. It is important for my office, as well as the UN Office for West Africa and all 30 agencies that operate in the Sahel, to

provide an integrated service to member states. My job also involves mobilizing international partners and other institutions, including the private sector, and then coordinating action to bring a coherent response to the multiple challenges facing the Sahel. Lastly, my office will highlight the potential in the Sahel and help promote sustainable development in the area. The Sahel is not lacking natural resources, although it may be lacking the financial means for sustainable development. We are saying, "Please, invest in the Sahel, because there are huge business opportunities in the region."

Almost 65% of the population in the Sahel is under 25, and there are few opportunities for young people. How will you tackle poverty and stop the youth from being attracted to groups engaged in terrorist activities?

The Sahel population is young, which is a challenge, but it is also an opportunity. Young people are energetic, dynamic and ready to promote development.

65%

Of the population in the Sahel is under 25 years

Youth in the region are becoming more educated and can benefit from the opportunities we see around us. What governments and the international community need to do is to recognize youth as players—not as a burden. It is important to help them identify opportunities for development, including creating small and medium enterprises.

What further action is required?

A change in policies. The region has plenty of opportunities, yet lots of the people are poor. We must break that paradox by changing policies.

What impact can the UN make in the Sahel, and what are the challenges?

First, we have a mandate from the Security Council to develop a UN Integrated Strategy for the Sahel. We are now developing a concrete plan, with specific activities and actions that can be promoted not only by the UN, but by other partners, including the private sector. Most of the challenges in the Sahel can be turned into opportunities.

Are there any opportunities?

Yes. For example, the Sahel is extremely hot, and that heat can be turned into renewable energy. Also, the richest fishing ground in the world is off the coast of West Africa, which covers some Sahelian countries. Again, the geographical position of the West African coastline is an advantage. Being close to Europe, fish can be caught there today and be in European markets the next day, while still fresh. It is not by chance that you see many big fishing companies going there.

What are the main challenges facing the Sahel?

One of the biggest constraints in the region is the lack of electricity. However, with the abundant sunlight and the wind all year round, we can create renewable energy almost everywhere in the Sahel. In some cases it could be off-grid solutions, and in other cases it can be on-grid solutions, meaning that we generate energy, transfer it to the national grid and distribute it to reduce dependence on fossil fuel. Under the Paris Agreement on climate change, countries are required to reduce their greenhouse gas emissions. We need to generate energy that can transform economies in the Sahel. For example, fishing products can be processed locally, creating value-added jobs for the local youth. Although pastoralism can pose a challenge due to the frequent conflicts between pastoralists and farmers in the region, at the same time, there is plenty of fresh beef, even halal, exported from the Sahel to such places as the Middle East and North Africa.

Do you intend to promote environmental protection and mitigation against climate change in the Sahel?

Although the Sahel is dry, it is also blessed with rivers and other water bodies: Gambia River, Senegal River, the Niger River, Lake Chad, and others. It also has underground water,

which is rare in other dry regions of the world. Here in our desert we have fresh water, which represents another opportunity that can be developed. Currently the water can't be harnessed for lack of energy. So, yes, the environmental issue is cross-cutting and will not be isolated. There are three factors that are cross-cutting: environmental issues (including energy), women and youth.

How do you foresee change here?

Change can happen by empowering the youth and women. In the Sahel, those under 25 years represent more than 65% of the population. Empowered women can produce enough to feed not only their families, but also the rest of the country. Any jobless youth who migrates is an economic loss to his or her society. It means they are no longer active in the home economy and, more important, economic migration puts their society at a disadvantage.

How will you partner with the private sector?

Our role is to demonstrate with actions, with concrete studies and best practices, that investing in the Sahel is good business. We will work with member states to reduce risks in the region and to make sure there is rule of law and that the right policies for investment are in place. Our role within the UN is to maintain that dialogue with member states and create the



One of the biggest constraints in the region is the lack of electricity. However, with the abundant sunlight and the wind all year round, we can create renewable energy almost everywhere in the Sahel.



conditions conducive for good business.

How do you envisage your collaboration with governments?

The UN has been operating in this region for many years, so we have excellent relations with governments. We have also excellent relations now with lower-level authorities like subnational authorities and local communities. We also have a good partnership with the World Bank, the African Development Bank and many NGOs operating in the region. Our role as the UN is to provide leadership and vision and to create a platform for all actors to come together for the region's development. The support plan we have prepared is not a list of projects; it would be a mistake to think that you can transform economies through pilot projects. We are talking about scaling up initiatives and opportunities that are there already and creating the transformations needed at the national level. Development will not be achieved by foreigners but by Sahelians themselves. I have been inspired for a long time by this saying by late Burkinabe historian Joseph Ki-Zerbo: "We do not develop others, we develop ourselves." 🌱