

Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification (Exclusive Horizons)

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"Mauritania needs to rethink its development by valuing its strengths."

The Covid19 pandemic is also a global economic crisis. Africa, which has so far been very weakly affected, is seeing its poorly performing health facilities put to the test. Containment measures, curfews and other business closures and travel bans will permanently affect the economies of the continent's countries with very few resilient. Calling for the outright cancellation of the debt for the benefit of poor countries, reiterated by Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, current president of the G5 Sahel, the partners preferred a moratorium. How could the countries of the continent in General and Mauritania in particular overcome the crisis born of this pandemic. To address this and other issues, Horizons continues its series of interviews. We interviewed Ibrahim Thiaw, Executive Secretary of the United Nations Convention on Combating Desertification. Mr. Thiaw, a Mauritanian, is also a special adviser to the Un Secretary-General in the Sahel. "He has 40 years of experience in sustainable development, environmental governance and natural resource management."

Horizons: What impacts could the COVID19 pandemic have on the African continent in general and the Sahel countries in particular which are "ecologically vulnerable. "

Ibrahim Thiaw: Vulnerable countries suffer on the medical level but also and above all on the social and ecological level Everything is linked. Countries with weak medical capabilities are also underdeveloped. The Sahel region has the particularity of a vulnerable ecology. Therefore, one of two things: either people have a serious social problem in the city, they return to rural areas to cultivate. Or those who are in these rural areas cannot produce, they head for the cities. So the pendulum movement between rural areas and cities will intensify. If this movement is not well organized, it could have serious ecological and social consequences. What I just mentioned concerns the short term. The big problem with the Covid-19 is the breakdown of savings. This is a long-term impact. How

are the Sahelian countries going to be able to adapt, adjust or, perhaps, rethink their development? It is possible to be wait-and-see and say that everything will work out as is often the case or anticipate taking into account that there is a major transformation of the world economy that is going to take place. And, see how, as small countries from an economic point of view, draw fire chestnuts. This reflection must be carried out in the Sahel countries in general and in Mauritania in particular. Mauritania, which must rethink its development by making the most of its assets. The current economic situation is such that we must either find the path to development or stagnate for a long time. It all depends on leadership, what intellectuals, Mauritanian researchers want to do, what economists will offer. Beyond the ecological dimension, it is an economic, social, political question. It is a question of which trajectory the Sahelian countries want to take. It is a question of how these countries can use their enormous opportunities to start again on new bases and to develop while taking into account the economic moult which operates on a world scale.

Horizons: You said that Mauritania must build on its strengths. What are these assets?

Ibrahim Thiaw: For strengths, I start with the obvious. The Sun is a boon for renewable energy. With good investments, Mauritania can not only meet its needs, but also export the surplus. Mauritania is a country which has political and security stability.

The second asset is the wind, especially in the coastal area. This wind is also energy. The sun and the wind combined are solar energy during the day and wind energy at night. This is what is currently happening in Nouakchott on a more or less reduced scale. The sun and the wind combined relieved the thermal power stations there. This concept which has proven itself in Nouakchott can be extended to a larger scale.

The assets of Mauritania are also natural resources, fish, important opportunities for agricultural development. We can see however that there is a mess on the agricultural level today, especially pastoral with an undeveloped potential. If I say mess, it's the opposite of trump. And, a lot of potential is not currently exploited. Mauritania can take advantage of the high demand for halal, organic meat in neighboring and even distant countries by developing its potential in this area. It's a niche for Mauritania. But it has not yet been able to set up an economic circuit which can promote these products and by-products.

The assets of Mauritania are also its youth. Will you succeed in properly training young Mauritians? National education is a big challenge. A young, vigorous

population is a huge advantage. Mauriticians are traders, adventurers ... with a reputation for honesty at the international level.

Horizons: Can the countries of the Sahel, faced with the effects of climate change, terrorism and other community tensions, sustainably cope with the COVID 19 pandemic and its effects on their economies.

Ibrahim Thiaw: There are many challenges, most of which have common sources. The causes of all these phenomena are found in the degradation of the land, the lack of water and the destructuring of the Sahelian rural economy. What technology can be implemented to change this paradigm? It's energy. Today if you kill an animal in the Sahel, you are obliged to consume it the same day under penalty of rotting. This applies to milk, vegetables ... So there is a lot of agricultural loss due to the lack of energy. This is why the Sahelians also speak of daily expenses. Every day we go to the market if we have money. We go there every day because we have no energy.

In Niger, the meat preservation technique is Kilichi which is equivalent to Tishtar in Mauritania because of the lack of means of preservation. So the technology that can positively transform the situation is energy applied to agriculture, access to water, education, medicine. So we have to rethink our development. There are many challenges. But we are intelligent enough, as a Sahelian, a Mauritanian, to take up these challenges and build our development on the basis of our strengths. If we keep asking for help, we will not get there. We have a lot of strengths. Even if many of our young people are not well trained, they are ingenious, creative. We must therefore release their energies.

Horizons: Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, President-in-Office of the G5 Sahel, has urged the cancellation of the debt of African countries to enable them to face the consequences of COVID. What will this cancellation bring?

Ibrahim Thiaw: As I am not an expert on this question, I answer with humility. For the poorest countries, especially those in the G5 Sahel, I can think of no better solution than debt cancellation. For countries with higher incomes, care must be taken not to give the impression that Africans are insolvent. Countries that can afford to pay off their debts can request a deferred payment. On the other hand, some countries are so weak that, to rethink their development, redirect it, they must be freed from this debt burden.

Horizons: What lessons can Africa in general and African countries in particular learn from this pandemic?

Ibrahim Thiaw: For three months, we have been thinking to rethink our development. There are many lessons to be learned. The first is how to avoid a new pandemic. The Covid 19 virus would have come from bats to transit through the pangolin which (these pangolins) are essentially African. The lesson is to stop entering spaces that can bring us viruses. We have gone very far in the destruction of nature. As humans, we believed ourselves so strong to do anything. A virus has just shown us that we are very weak. So we have to be humble and know how far we can go to exploit the rare minerals in Africa, how far we can use children for work, how far we can go into the forests, destroy the environment natural.

The second lesson. In three months we hid but we worked. So there is a new world opening up to technology. A world in which it is possible to work remotely. Another lesson: Africans in general, because of their high dependence on imports, suffer from border closings. We are too dependent while we have everything there. How to develop our resources to transform and consume them? We can learn from it to transform our economies, create jobs, create wealth prosperity. 60 years after independence, we cannot continue to export African raw materials and buy back, at gold prices, the finished product resulting from the processing of these raw materials.

The last lesson. It has always been considered that investing in health is not profitable. We have evidence to the contrary with this pandemic. Africa cannot continue to export its patients. The continent must invest in research, medicine. For the past three months, Heads of State, ministers ... have not traveled. Everyone was treated on the spot. If we did it for three months, we need to learn from it and change paradigms.

Horizons: Regarding the pandemic, you wrote in a recent column: "After the trauma, can we return to business as usual?" So will there be post-covid awareness¹⁹? Or, once the remedy is found, will the world return to its routine?

Ibrahim Thiaw: Can we rebuild the global economy in recession? What are the most resilient development models that can be implemented to withstand the shock like that of the Covid 19? How to ensure economic development while preserving the natural environment on which we depend? Reflection on these questions is ongoing at the level of our convention and in other international organizations.

The danger with the Covid-19 is to think first of reviving economies before sustainable development and the environment. Such an attitude would be a big

mistake. Interview by Khalilou Diagana The National Horizons Daily

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