

# Preface

In December 2008, when I met with the president of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), I was far from imagining that the work we wanted to do together would become a reality so quickly. As early as the beginning of 2009, we were given a unique opportunity to share our respective experiences through the celebration, throughout 2009, of 15 years of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (WAEMU). For the IDRC, this was a good opportunity to make the large network of researchers it has been supporting for years available to support a regional ambition. For the WAEMU, celebrating this anniversary was the occasion to step back and take a critical look at the past 15 years of regional integration efforts.

Once the decision was made, it was time to make this shared determination a reality. What was said was done, and with contributions from our respective specialists, preparation for the conference *Regional Integration and Poverty-reduction Strategies in WAEMU Member Countries* conference kicked off.

After several preparatory meetings and a call for proposals, the conference was held on December 8 to 10, 2009 in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso, attracting over a hundred researchers, journalists, representatives of civil society, national leaders and WAEMU experts. During this conference, the development, implementation and monitoring of regional poverty-reduction policies were compared and discussed by researchers, journalists and various members of civil society.

These three intense days of discussion enabled WAEMU to take a look in the mirror, focussing on a number of equally important questions:

Has WAEMU made the best choices and adopted good methods?

Has WAEMU been sufficiently attentive to the populations and responded to their expectations?

Has stakeholder commitment to the integration process been equal to the challenges?

How can we envision the future of the Union so that its populations are more at the heart of regional policies?

How can information about the WAEMU be shared with the Union's citizens?

Participants in the conference attempted to find hard-hitting answers to these questions. Researchers, the media and members of civil society spoke candidly. The Union's choices were examined in minute detail. Some elements of these analyses deserve to be recalled: the convergence of WAEMU Member States remains a great challenge, poverty in the zone persists despite the institutional and regulatory advances that have been made, and weak intra-community exchanges remain a concern despite internal tariff removal.

In addition, the Union's strategic choices were critically reviewed and the issue of the various parties' participation in developing and evaluating community policies was the object of long discussions and analyses. Many of these are presented in this book.

Regarding this last point, it is interesting to highlight that this book takes into account relevant recommendations made by researchers while learning from this experience that is still rare in West Africa, and demonstrates to what extent discussions among researchers, decision-makers and journalists are essential in enabling as many people as possible to make quality contributions to the process of regional integration.

This book is filling a need and also demonstrates the need and urgency of setting up regular exchange platforms among decision-makers, researchers and the media so that regional integration not be a matter for a select few but a participative process that involves as many people as possible.

It is also an excellent—and even indispensable—reference for researchers and the general public, as well as for the leaders of WAEMU and other African integration institutions.

This is why the WAEMU Commission, which made every effort to make the joint work possible, is happy to have contributed to producing this reference book on regional integration in West Africa. This is a good opportunity to congratulate the Canadian IDRC and the CIDA, the researchers, the Member State decision-makers and the journalists for this major intellectual contribution. Let them all be thanked here for their involvement, which will, I am sure, contribute to a regional integration that is advancing slowly but surely.

President of the WAEMU Commission

Soumaïla Cissé

Wealth through Integration

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in West Africa

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