Despite appalling poverty, more countries in West and Central Africa are under democratic rule than ever before. It is also encouraging to see many governments striving for good governance despite having to face enormous hurdles. In economic development, however, progress is evident only in the long term.

Anyone inclined to regard West and Central Africa as a cluster of trouble spots, war zones and other catastrophes will find confirmation for their views in the period between early 2015 and early 2017. Once again, not one of the countries in the region can be considered a democracy in consolidation. The Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo are failing states, but even in other countries, Islamist terror and military conflicts represent a threat to peace and stability. It is no coincidence that these countries are located in the subregion of Central Africa, which generally fares worse than West Africa.

Economic conditions, already distinguished by dramatic levels of poverty, have deteriorated even further. Currencies and prices are less stable than they were two years ago. Dependence on raw materials and low global market prices – particularly oil – have also dampened the performance of several economies. The after-effects of the Ebola epidemic are still felt, particularly in Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone. Many countries offer little evidence of equality of opportunity for men and women and different ethnic groupings. Education and the R&D sector are woefully neglected. All of this would suggest a discouraging outlook for this BTI region, where the state of economic transformation is already the poorest in the world.

Nor should the highest level of difficulty among all the BTI regions serve as an excuse for the unsatisfactory transformation management of some governments. It often seems that officials have no appetite for neither liberal democracy nor inclusive market economies. Efforts to shore up power bases are reflected in rampant corruption and sluggish efforts to combat it. In many areas, reconciliation of interests and consensus-building are almost nonexistent, while a number of autocrats appear to view development cooperation with donor countries as nothing more than an additional means of retaining power, a necessary evil at best.

So far, so grim. But a second, more long-term oriented look at the situation offers a corrective to these pessimistic prospects. Admittedly, the examples of progress are rarely spectacular and are unfolding at a snail’s pace, but they are substantial and demonstrable. The clearest progress is seen in political transformation. Average scores have risen considerably since 2006, and the BTI 2018 shows more countries under democratic rule in West and Central Africa than ever before. With Burkina Faso making great democratic progress by bringing the autocratic era of Blaise Compaoré to a remarkable end, 11 of the region’s 18 countries now fulfill minimum standards of democracy. Ghana is once again in the lead, having managed its third change of government via the ballot box since democratization in the early 1990s.

Peaceful transfers of power are becoming more common in other countries, too. April 2017 saw a historic turning point in Nigeria, when incumbent Goodluck Jonathan accepted his surprise defeat in the presidential elections at the hands of Muhammadu Buhari, resulting in a transition largely unmarred by violence. Military dictatorships and facade democracies ruled by hegemonic parties and autocrats are increasingly a thing of the past, even if they linger on in countries such as Chad, the Republic of the Congo and Mauritania. Even countries hampered by extremely weak stateness, such as the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, have at least pursued electoral democracy.
And a view of the economic and social domain reveals quite positive trends in the longue durée. Aggregate scores have improved slightly since the BTI 2006. This applies to an even greater extent when evaluating performance in the area of governance, which is all the more remarkable when you look at other world regions where some aspects of the quality of governance have significantly deteriorated. Certainly, most of the region’s governments still feature major deficits in governance capability and the efficient use of assets, and efforts to achieve societal consensus are unsatisfactory. The fight against rebels and terrorists sometimes leaves no other option than to apply counter-violence. But Mali, for one, proves that this doesn’t have to mean abandoning negotiations and peace agreements altogether. It is in the fight against Islamism, in particular, that the region is reliant on international cooperation. But there is also progress to be found in regional cooperation. When the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) used its leverage to enforce the resignation of Gambian president Yahya Jammeh after he lost the presidential election, it demonstrated that cooperation is increasingly guided by shared democratic values.

Majority pass the litmus test

Of the 18 countries in the region, 11 are under democratic rule – the best result since the BTI began. Peaceful transfers of power are becoming more common, military forces are less likely to step in as veto actors. Nonetheless, not one of the democracies in the region is free of defects.

Where are transfers of power decided – in back rooms, on the battlefield or at the ballot box? This question is the litmus test for democracies, and one that an increasing number of countries in West and Central Africa are passing. Certainly, first-time elections following periods of autocracy, such as Burkina Faso’s democratic debut in late 2015, provide welcome news. But a distinct marker of maturity is that a government can be voted out of power. There were two examples of this in the review period. In Ghana, the opposition New Patriotic Party managed to beat the National Democratic Congress in both the presidential and parliamentary elections. This brought about Ghana’s third peaceful change of government since the beginning of democratization in the early 1990s.

And the transfer of power in Nigeria truly merits the label “historic.” Even misuse of oil revenues couldn’t buy Jonathan victory over his opponent Buhari. Following his defeat, Jonathan earned the respect of his fellow citizens by accepting the result – by no means standard procedure in Africa’s most populous country – and thus averting widespread bloodshed. The hope remains that Nigeria’s elite will generally pay more attention to democratic rules in the future. That includes the new president, a one-time member of a military junta who has yet to prove his integrity and governance capability.

Keeping to the term for the highest office of the land is another hallmark of democracy. Most constitutions in West and Central Africa forbid re-election of the president after two terms, and adhering to this provision now appears to be the thing to do in the majority of countries. That includes Nigeria, which has the additional requirement of proportional north/south representation, and Senegal. Benin’s president, Thomas Boni Yayi, and Liberia’s Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, the only female head of state on the continent, heeded their respective constitutions by refraining from seeking third terms.

In hard autocracies such as Chad, Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo, on the other hand, these rules are abolished or artificially circumvented by changing the constitution and then declaring the present term to be the first following this new constitution. The postponement of elections in the Democratic Republic of the Congo also points to a deficit of democratic sentiment. The mandate of Joseph Kabila, in power since the death of his father in 2001, has expired. But the indications are that he has no intention of actually resigning.

Electoral irregularities cannot be ruled out, even in democracies. Niger opposition leader Hama Amadou, who stands accused of criminal activity, launched his campaign for the general election in spring 2016 from a prison cell. When the first round of voting was called in favor of incumbent Mahamadou Issoufou, Amadou chose not to run in the decisive second round.

These examples caution us against casting political transformation in West and Central Africa in too rosy a light. The absolute level of democracy is not particularly high, and even front-runner Ghana still numbers among the defective democracies, which in West Africa are particularly characterized by deficits in the rule of law and weak stateness.
The fact that the Sahel countries encompass a number of areas barely controlled by the state is a consequence of Islamist fundamentalism, which represents the greatest political danger for the region. Constitutions of countries in West and Central Africa are traditionally liberal and secular; sub-Saharan Islam is generally considered relatively liberal. And yet a violent, fundamentalist interpretation of Islam has proliferated even here. Radicalization is partly imported, from Saudi Arabia and North Africa in particular. The rise of the terror group Boko Haram sometimes appears unstoppable. Once neighboring Cameroon, Chad and Nigeria joined the struggle against Boko Haram, they too experienced clashes with security forces and terrorist attacks.

But violence is by no means the sole prerogative of Islamists. The Central African Republic saw confrontation between Christian militias and Muslim Séléka rebels, which monopolized government business for a time in 2013. Christian militias were initially fighting against the Muslim government, but following the fall of the rebel government they extended their attacks to the Muslim minority population. The Central African Republic’s transitional government and the U.N. peacekeepers had great difficulty in preventing these assaults. A regular government was elected but the conflict continues to smolder.

Still, there is also some good news concerning the level of violence in the region. While the military continues to exert significant influence in Chad, Mauritania and Togo, armed forces in many other countries are returning to their barracks. Even the early 2017 mutinies in Côte d’Ivoire were driven by demands for better pay and treatment rather than political ambitions. Blatant military dictatorships are less prevalent, particularly in West Africa.

No simple path out of poverty

The drop in oil prices is being felt in West and Central Africa. Currency and price stability also deteriorated, but remain at a comparatively high level. This, once again, cannot be said for the state of socioeconomic development. In general, the BTI 2018 confirmed the dispiriting findings of previous years – the region of West and Central Africa remains the poorhouse of the world. The state of economic transformation is lower than in any other BTI region. Poverty and social exclusion are widespread, social security systems and the kind of educational facilities that might provide a brighter future are generally at a rudimentary level. Health care for the population is insufficient, the danger of epidemics like Ebola or the eternal problem of malaria represent constant threats. There is not one country in West and Central Africa that can boast of having a developed or functioning market economy. There is an enormous discrepancy between the rudimentary market economies of the Central African Republic and the Democratic Republic of the Congo on the one hand, and countries like Ghana, Senegal and Benin on the other, but even the latter are only mediocre by global standards.

With the national economies of the region still insufficiently diversified and highly dependent on exports of raw materials, they are susceptible to fluctuations in global market prices and other effects of the so-called “resource curse.” So, in light of the global drop in oil prices, it is hardly surprising that economic performance has deteriorated in seven countries, falling to an all-time low in the BTI – resulting in issues like higher inflation, lower growth, increased debt and other issues.

Nor is it surprising to find oil exporters such as Chad, the Republic of the Congo and Nigeria and – to a lesser extent – Mauritania among the losers. In Nigeria, for instance, over 90% of exports are based on oil. In conjunction with the fight against Boko Haram, this represents a significant brake on economic development. A similar situation prevails in Sierra Leone, where the export economy is suffering significantly from a sharp drop in global market prices for iron ore and diamonds.

The problem of resource dependency – exacerbated in many places by catastrophic governance – is by no means exclusive to the region. But when compared to other regions, it is all the more remarkable that this dependence does not automatically result in weak performance. Even countries such as Cameroon, Guinea and Liberia, which are greatly dependent on (diverse) raw material exports, have not suffered deterioration. Another resource-dependent country, the Central African Republic, even achieved the region’s greatest improvement in economic transformation. This recovery can be largely chalked up to peace dividends following years of devastating violent conflict, during which the already weak economy forfeited more than a third of its output after starting from an already very low level.

On the other hand, there was also a noticeable deterioration in economic transformation in Ghana, which scored above-average values for most other BTI criteria. This can be blamed on the malign influence of the NDC government over economic policy. It was also this homemade economic crisis that proved pivotal in the decisive victory of the opposition party NPP.
However, declining economic strength should not blind us to positive aspects such as price and currency stability, and long-term progress. Currencies and prices have remained stable in most of the former French colonies, thanks in large part to the currency union. Within the CFA franc currency union, which is pegged to the euro, two independent central banks set monetary and exchange-rate policies respectively. The Central Bank of the West African States has performed significantly better than the Bank of the Central African States. True, currency areas restrict national governance capability in monetary policy, and fixed linkage with the euro exposes member states to the danger of contagion from eurozone crises. But these disadvantages are more than offset by the generally low inflation rates among members of the currency union (Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, the Central African Republic, Chad, the Republic of the Congo, Côte d’Ivoire, Mali, Niger, Senegal and Togo). Non-members the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ghana, Guinea, Liberia, Mauritania, Nigeria and Sierra Leone all had to contend with higher price increases. Price and currency stability has deteriorated slightly since 2016, but its absolute level is still considerably high.

The poor socioeconomic standing of the population remains the greatest challenge to economic transformation in West and Central Africa. This insight of the BTI is echoed by other sources, such as the United Nations’ Human Development Index (HDI). A long-term view of developments between 1990 and 2015 reveals that every country in the region has improved – sometimes considerably – in key indicators of human development, such as income per capita, level of education and life expectancy.

But it also holds true that this absolute progress cannot be confused with development to rival that of other regions. Most of the countries of West and Central Africa are still among the least developed in worldwide comparison. There is progress, but it is proceeding at a snail’s pace. The level of socioeconomic development measured by the BTI has remained appallingly low; even Ghana falls below the BTI average. Things only get a little rosier when we turn to welfare regimes, which are now fulfilling at least very basic requirements in 11 countries. Extreme poverty and inequality remain the greatest challenges in the region.

Mind the gap: fair economic output, trailing social output

Rules of the game increasingly respected
In the past twelve years, transformation management in West and Central Africa has improved to a greater degree than in any other global region. A third of countries now boast good governance. A willingness to cooperate at a regional and global level remains one of the region’s strengths.

In no area of the world is transformation management as difficult as it is in West and Central Africa. With the exception of Benin, Ghana, Senegal and Togo, the problems are massive everywhere, in the Central African Republic they are overwhelming. The performance of some governments is all the more impressive considering the structural constraints, poverty, war and social conflicts that they face. No region has improved as much in any BTI dimension over the last twelve years as West and Central Africa has in governance, and BTI 2018 found good transformation management in six of 18 governments.

New to this group is Benin, where President Boni refrained from running again when his second term ended, leaving elected successor Patrice Talon to pursue an ambitious reform agenda beginning March 2016. The biggest relative winner is Nigeria, where the incoming President Buhari has been far more successful in combating Boko Haram than his predecessor Jonathan. Weak political management distinguishes the Central African Republic, Mauritania, Cameroon and the Republic of the Congo; the latter saw the biggest fall in governance.

Finally, Chad and the Democratic Republic of the Congo offer no evidence of transformation management whatsoever. At the same time, they are extreme examples of the shadow side of governance – in steering capability, for instance. Many governments are unable to think beyond short-term retention of power. Even front-runners Senegal and Ghana manage only moderate scores here. In Guinea, on the other hand, the government of Alpha Condé has managed to improve the investment climate in the mining sector and strengthen control over the military. In macroeconomic terms, too, the country appears stable.

A further weak spot in governance in West and Central Africa is resource efficiency. The obligation to include different ethnic groups makes cabinets in many countries large and unwieldy; examples include Cameroon, the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Nigeria. While anti-corruption efforts are being stepped up almost everywhere, and are increasingly institutionalized, in some cases it remains unclear whether this is anything more than lip service – or even an instrument with which to attack political opponents. The treatment of Niger’s opposition leader provides one example. Amadou of the former government party MNSD had barely announced his candidacy in the presidential election when (uncorroborated) accusations of child trafficking emerged. Amadou was forced to campaign from his prison cell.

Drivers of improved governance in the region
Given the high incidence of violence in the region, the way governments deal with societal cleavages is enormously important. Benin, Liberia and Senegal managed this reasonably well, Ghana and Niger a little less successfully. The findings for the rest of the region are more sobering. Particularly problematic was the cleavage management of the Republic of the Congo. As expected, long-serving president Denis Sassou Nguesso was returned to power in the facade elections of October 2016, and he subsequently launched a massive campaign against the opposition. Things were little better in Chad. Although the government has been increasingly effective in marginalizing the numerous “politico-military” movements, the dominance of President Idriss Déby’s ethnic group is undiminished. The rape of young women by members of the Zaghawa clan, including relatives of government officials, triggered outrage. Elsewhere it is possible to discern good intentions, but the potential for violence remains high. In Nigeria, for instance, the fight against the brutal Islamists of Boko Haram is not the only challenge. The traditional north-south conflict, which also comes with an ethnoreligious dimension, is a further source of conflict, so too the Igbo region (formerly Biafra) and the Niger Delta. With measures such as proportional rules for filling government positions and the requirement that political parties be multi-ethnic and national in make-up, the government is at least trying to overcome old conflict lines.

The pronounced will to international cooperation in many places remains an encouraging sign. Of course, this is partly due to a dependence on development aid. However, for most governments it would be wrong to dismiss the idea of intrinsic motivation out of hand. Senegal and Ghana stand out in this regard. Particularly impressive is the discernible improvement in regional cooperation between countries in the region, although here, too, the habitually wide gap between West and Central Africa is very much apparent. The ability of West African countries to cooperate while observing the rules of democratic governance was demonstrated by the ECOWAS during the electoral crisis in Gambia, which was not covered by the BTI due to the small size of its population. Long-serving president Jammeh was the surprise loser in the December 2016 elections. Even more surprising was his initial acceptance of the election result, which he nonetheless rescinded after a few days. But under pressure from Nigeria, Senegal and other countries, Jammeh finally declared that he would make way for his successor Adama Barrow and leave the country.

Things are a little different in Central Africa. Congolese President Kabila, in power since 2001 and now at the end of his second and final term, may have proclaimed his willingness to eventually resign. But the elections which are now due have been postponed indefinitely.

Fragile roots

Even amid extreme poverty, democracy is possible – this is perhaps the most important message from the region of West and Central Africa. There is much to indicate that in West Africa, at least, democratic values are progressively taking root. The rising incidence of peaceful transfer of power is as much a testament to this as the fact that violent takeovers are no longer accepted. Long-term improvements in socioeconomic development, while slow, also offer cause for hope.

We must be careful, however, not to overestimate these achievements or place too much faith in future progress. Political turbulence, especially, cannot be ruled out in the coming years. How President Kaboré and his government approach reform in Burkina Faso will prove crucial. The Democratic Republic of the Congo, the notorious “problem case,” could run into turbulence if the issue of President Kabila’s successor cannot be settled smoothly. The advanced age of Cameroon’s President Paul Biya, one of the last “dinosaurs” in the region, also raises questions about succession. In Nigeria, it remains to be seen whether President Buhari can master the challenges of his country, particularly in light of rumors concerning his health. The struggle against Boko Haram Islamists, poverty and corruption, management of the oil sector – solving these problems will be far from easy. For post-conflict states like the Côte d’Ivoire and Mali, it is essential that they continue on their present path. The new government in the Central African Republic faces even greater challenges. Violent Islamism remains a danger to the entire region.

Europe and the West need to devote greater attention to West and Central Africa than they have to date, and not just because of the threat of Islamism and migratory movements across the Mediterranean. Excessive optimism is unwarranted. The desire to identify a particular country as a beacon of hope often tempts us to overlook problems and risks. Mali was one such example in the past. Now Ghana and Senegal are being extolled as “model countries,” but too loudly, and too often.

In any case, concrete recommendations are always better than declarations. Political transformation must ultimately strive for stable framework conditions. This includes balance between ethnic and religious identity groups. Islamism is partly stoked from outside, but measures on the ground can help prevent radicalization, particularly among youth. Averting danger also requires professional security forces. Security requires development – and without development, there will be no security in the long term.
Overcoming the temptations of extremism will also require a reduction in poverty, an increase in equality, and economic growth. The diversification of national economies is on the agenda of raw material exporters, along with a greater focus on education. Just as important – and too often ignored in development policy debates – is controlling population growth. Excessive birth rates threaten to nullify any other development achievements.

Above all, transformation is and will remain a sovereign affair. Development aid and international cooperation may ease acute emergency situations and facilitate development – and, in the best cases, even initiate it – but transformation from outside is unrealistic. The expectations placed on development cooperation are often excessive. Moreover, a paternalistic attitude, particularly toward former European colonies, is neither appropriate nor effective. This doesn’t mean negating value-oriented Africa policies. A more sensible approach would be to support regional integration, which is already yielding discernible results in West Africa in cooperative efforts against terrorism and in support of democratic standards. Western countries in particular should be aware that conflicting objectives may arise from time to time. The primacy of security interests in the Sahel region and West Africa often results in support for incumbents – such as those in Cameroon and Chad – whose behavior is contrary to the long-term interests of both the international community and their countries’ populations.