

Transcript of GFDD's second Global Roundtable with His Excellency Jean-François R. Zinsou, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative of Benin to the United Nations.

**Natasha Despotovic: (GFDD Executive Director)**

**Question #1**

Ambassador Zinsou, congratulations on the re-election of President Yayi, and talk a bit about the challenges he is facing with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and what are his plans to improve the social and economic situation in the country?

**Ambassador Zinsou: (Republic of Benin)**

**Response #1**

Thank you for giving me this opportunity. It is a pleasure for me to take part in this Global Roundtable and at events for young people at the UN.

You were talking about Benin, it was a democracy from 1960-1963 led by a democratic President and the first coup took place in 1963. And from that coup on, to 1972 we had 11 governments in a short time frame. Since the last coup in 1972 we have had political stability and no military takeovers. As you mentioned in 1990, the historic National Conference paved the way for peaceful transition [from Marxism] to a multi-party democracy-- the first in Africa --which and that is why it is labeled as the Cradle of Democracy.

In this process we have been conducting presidential elections and, as you saw, President Dr. Boni Yayi was re-elected on March 13, 2011 and officially inaugurated on April 6.

You were asking about his way of tackling the MDGs and I will tell you that he is very committed to their achievement. Benin was selected as one of the 10 pilot countries to accelerate the pace of the implementation of MDGs in Africa, because we had a full scale assessment of what that was supposed to be done to achieve them by 2015.

And in that sense, one of the critical measures that the President declared, was free and primary education. And in the implementation of that decision during the timeframe 2007-2010, six thousand new classrooms were built and 20,000 new teachers were recruited. And when you are recruiting new teachers it means that you are creating employment and giving people more prospects.

Something that is also important is in regard to MDGs 4 and 5 -- Maternal Child Health. The President has declared caesarian operations, and malaria treatment free for mothers and children below the age of 5. And those measures are very critical in our country, as malaria is a very big issue. And for his new term he is planning, as announced in his inauguration statement, to turn all villages in Benin into Millennium Villages to give them the standards as set forth in the MDGs.

To fight poverty President Yayi has introduced microcredit which gives anyone who wants to, a kick-start in any enterprise. And that is the main reason why he was elected in the first place, for example, the elections were supposed to be in two rounds, but Dr. Yayi received 53.14% at the first round, so this proves that people react to good policy. People are educated and even if they don't go to school, they have the common sense to appreciate who is doing a good job.

**Natasha Despotovic: (GFDD Executive Director)**

We also know that you are a co chair on the United Nations conference on Youth and we want to congratulate you on the wonderful work you are doing in preparation for the conference taking place in July.

The lovely young people from the United Nations Association of the Dominican Republic have some questions that are related to Youth issues, and to your country.

**Ivan Cruz: (UNA-DR)**

**Question #2**

Benin is reported to be one of the most stable democracies in Africa. How has that positively impacted the attraction of foreign investment and tourism to your country?

**Ambassador Zinsou: (Republic of Benin)**

**Response #2**

Benin is a stable country and has in place a good legislation to welcome investment and the President even has an investment council, so we have a framework that can take up activities that generate wealth in the country. Stability is a good framework for development. Due to the fact that, Benin is a country at peace, and without turmoil, we can get people involved in such activities. We also have a well-trained young workforce who are involved in these activities, so Benin welcomes investment in all areas, and one of the major fields of investment is Information Communications Technology because Benin has a Global fiber optic cable system and we are trying to build on that. Our Minister of Communications said that we are not yet exploiting our oil deposits, but ICT is like our oil now!

**Luisa: (UNA-DR)**

**Question #3**

What are the top three achievements by the United Nations in terms of advancements of youth-related issues around the world?

**Ambassador Zinsou: (Republic of Benin)**

**Response #3**

I would say that it is a good thing that the UN has taken up the issue of Youth. During the first decade, there was a World Youth Program of Action which was adopted with ten major fields of activity and in 2008 there was a new resolution to complement these elements with five more taking into account the new challenges young people are facing, so just the fact of having such a program is a major achievement.

Something we should also take into account is the MDGs and the fact that the MDGs address issues that are critical for young people, such as education and health. That is also something we have to consider as an achievement.

**Alan Fernandez (UNA-DR)**

**Question #4**

There are 15 priority youth issues identified by the UN. Five of the issues, including Globalization, ICT, HIV/AIDS, Youth and Conflict and Intergenerational Relations were added by the World Youth Report in 2003. With the 2011 UN Conference on Youth imminent, do you envisage any more new issues coming to the fore?

**Ambassador Zinsou: (Republic of Benin)**

**Response #4**

There are new challenges like climate change and its impact on young people and we have natural disasters and how young people react to them. What is most important now, I think, is to assess the implementation of those measures that have been adopted and see what we can do to make the international community more successful in tackling youth challenges. That is what I can tell you for the goal of this upcoming conference.

**Ambassador Francis Lorenzo: (Dominican Republic)**

**Question #5**

Going back on how Benin's President sees the importance of Information Communication Technology (ICTs) and its importance for the country's development, South South news launched an initiative with your President. We are now using World TV which is a satellite company in Paris to do some of the satellite transmissions between Benin and the USA but it is also about promoting Benin for tourism and investment and the way he can accomplish this is via the media, and that's the reason he launched this new channel. Could you elaborate a little more on that, please?

**Ambassador Zinsou: (Republic of Benin)**

**Response #5**

On December 16, 2010, the President of Benin was here to launch satellite broadcasting for the US, Canada, Caribbean and Latin America of Benin's National Broadcasting Corporation programs. This was a very decisive step to make information about Benin available to everyone, and not just of Beninese people. All you have to do is install your unit and you can see Africa in action and how it overcomes its challenges. It is very important to have real information about the country, staying in touch with events and keeping the connection with citizens when they are abroad, because it is important for them to know what is happening at home so they can contribute to the development of the country.

I think this is a major change for us, because before, you would have to search the internet, but now everything is at your fingertips. At the click of a button and you can directly participate in what is happening in Benin. It is a tremendous achievement for us and we are delighted to have a President who has so much vision for the future and cares about involving his citizens in the efforts of national construction.