

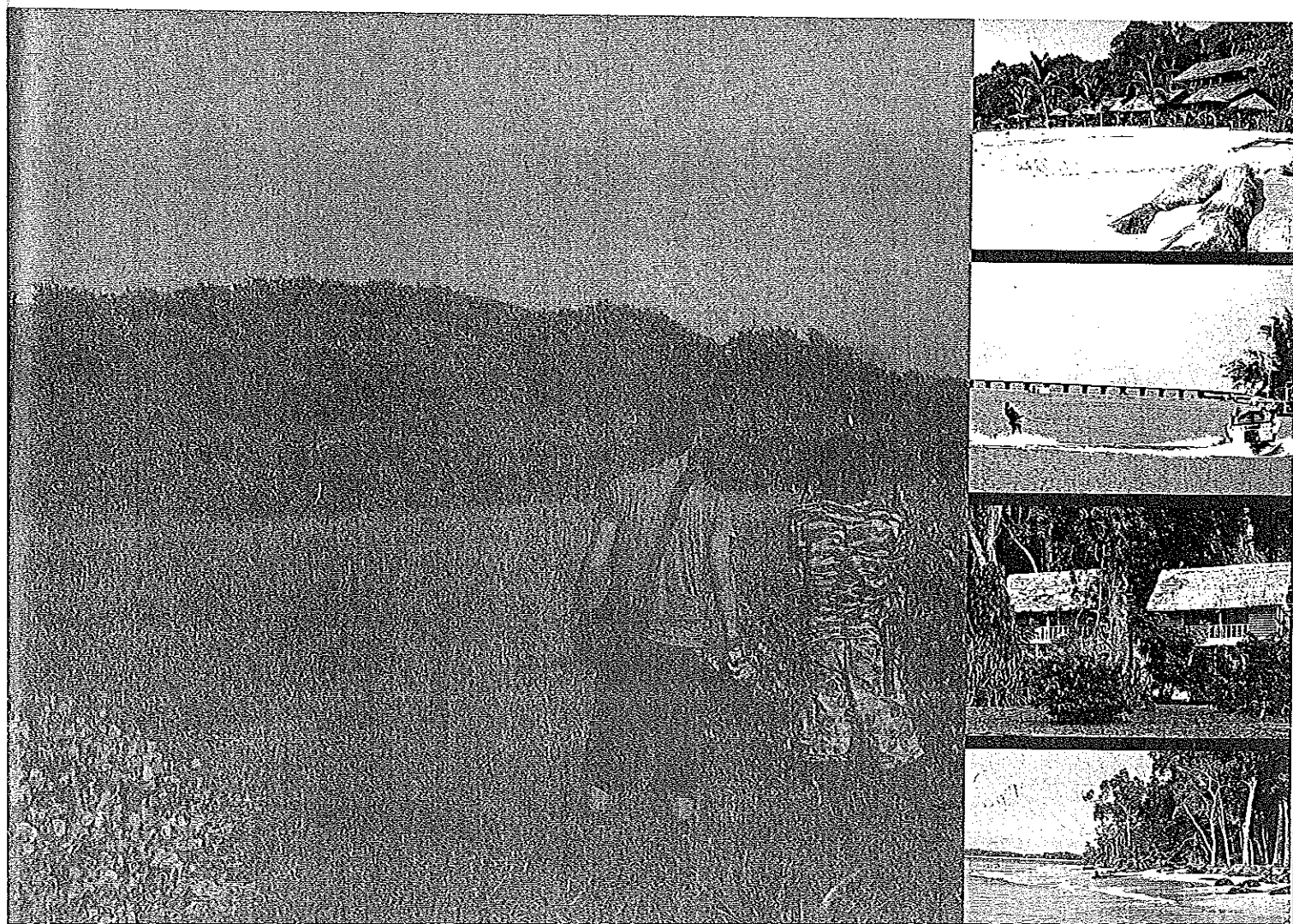
Tourism

Plans to increase the sector's contribution to GDP

Tourism Satellite Account survey in progress

Stimulating the development of geotourism

Upgrading the country's hotel capacity





More than 11% of the land mass is under conservation

Going green

Potential lies in cultivating the ecotourism offering

When it comes to potential for high-end tourism development, few countries in the world match that of Gabon. Political stability, territory covered by pristine forest and a commitment by presidential decree to conservation of over 11% of the country's surface have turned Gabon into a popular destination for environmentalists and wildlife lovers alike.

Conservation has so far been the forerunner to tourism development and the country is re-assessing ways to turn high-end ecotourism into a sustainable contributor to economic diversification, as well as a long-term sponsor for earlier efforts. Even if tourism is not expected to replace oil income, the impact on rural development and the training of human resources have made the sector among the top priorities within President Ali Bongo Ondimba's vision of Green Gabon, one of the three pillars of the Gabon Emergent programme that additionally targets economic growth through forestry, agriculture, fisheries and conservation efforts.

A BUSINESS AFFAIR: Business visitors to Libreville and Port-Gentil generate the most revenue. Although the pressures of the global economic crisis and turbulent events in Gabon's political scene curbed the growth in the number of international passengers passing through Libreville's airport since 2005 (international air traffic increased from 220,000 to 300,000 between 2005 and 2008), figures still rose slightly to 304,145 in 2009 compared to 301,293 the year before. The number of international arrivals in 2009 stood at 187,332, up from 185,534 in 2008, an estimated 96,431 (or a little under 50%) of which consisted of non-residents.

The average duration of stay was 40.9 days, which is largely influenced by the lengthy visits of friends and family, estimated at a mere 2000 individuals per year. Domestic passenger numbers in 2009 totalled 291,280 compared to 298,473 in 2008; despite the 2.4% drop, this is an impressive number for a population of around 1.4m, and one that highlights the high movement of people within the country as well as the shortage of cheaper transportation options such as road or rail.

HOTELS: There are 320 hotels operating in the country and an estimated 14,300 people are employed, formally and informally, in the hospitality sector. The total number of rooms are estimated at 5160, but, as a result of renovation efforts, around 4800 are available to the public. Employment in tourism is in close competition with the forestry sector, which offers the highest number of private sector jobs. The high-end segment in Libreville, where business visitors usually reside, is made up of four hotels: the Laico Okoumé Palace, Le Meridien, Maisha and Le Phare du Large. Previously announced plans to renovate the former Novotel hotel and build a five-star hotel/marina complex on the Boulevard Au Bord de Mer have been slow to take off. Pressure on these plans is high as the country is expected to host the African Cup of Nations in January 2012 and is in need of more high-end hotel capacity.

The Laico Okoumé Palace has announced it will increase the number of rooms from 267 to 320, as part of a €40m renovation of existing facilities. Meanwhile, Le Meridien is expected to invest €35m in overhauling its interior while maintaining its current 256-room total. Prices at Laico Okoumé Palace range between €195 for a standard single room and €1355 for the presidential suite, while at Le Meridien they fall between €192 for a standard single room and €1358 for the presidential suite. The high-end hotel segment is keen on getting out of the slump experienced during 2009. The Laico Okoumé Palace, for example, experienced a drop in turnover of 2.6% compared to a rise of 7.5% the year before. According to local media, Le Meridien saw its turnover drop 4.7% over the course of 2009, while occupancy rates declined from 60% in 2008 to 52%. As a result of the high rates and, in some cases, dated interior of the leading hotels, a large number of mid-range hotels are catering to domestic and an increasing share of foreign visitors. However, some hotel operators were optimistic about the prospects for 2010.

"The first half of 2010 has shown an important uptick," Karim Mzali, the manager of Laico Okoumé Palace, told

International air traffic through Libreville's airport grew from 301,293 in 2008 to 304,145 in 2009. The number of international arrivals in 2009 reached 187,332, up from 185,534 the previous year.

There are a total of 320 hotels in the country with an estimated 5160 rooms. However, due to current renovation efforts, some 4800 are available to the public.

Gabon will co-host the African Cup of Nations with Equatorial Guinea in January 2012. The urban tourism infrastructure will benefit from the tournament for the long term as hotel capacities and sports facilities are improved.

OBG. "Not only are the 'on-the-spot' reservations on the rise, internet bookings are also showing an increase, particularly from the oil and banking sectors."

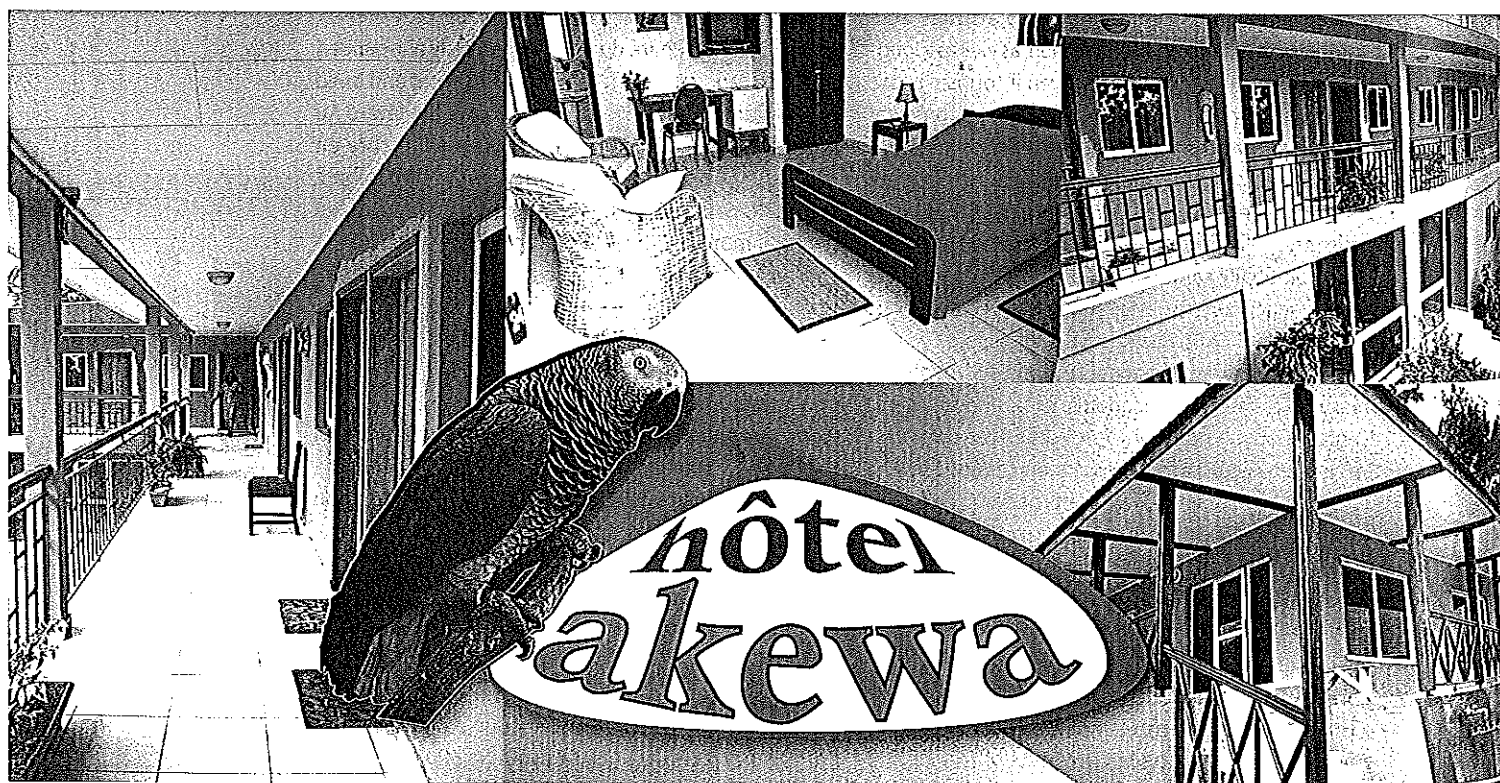
In line with President Ali Bongo's plans to promote Gabon's interior, high-end lodges are increasingly being used for conferences and meetings. One such example is the Lopé Hotel, based in the Lopé National Park, where numerous state-run meetings have been organised. The private sector seems to be following suit with an increasing number of board meetings and public relations activity taking place in the hotel. As the hotel's owner, Evelyne Doumba, told OBG, "Business reservations are currently a prime source of income and the main reason for an optimistic perspective for 2010."

THE 2012 CUP: Gabon's urban tourism will benefit from the upcoming African Cup of Nations that is to be co-hosted with Equatorial Guinea in January 2012. Gabon is now catching up on delayed preparations for sports and hotel facilities. The Confederation of African Football requires a minimum of 5000 hotel rooms be available during the event. Nearly CFA7.5bn (€11.4m) has been put aside for the works which include the construction of new hotels with a minimum of 20 rooms each in Libreville, Franceville, Bongoville and Moanda. **MEASURING WEIGHT:** Despite its potential, tourism has been a small contributor to the economy. According to figures of the General Directorate of Tourism (Direction General du Tourisme, DGT), it has contributed an estimated 3% to GDP over the past 20 years. This is

considered a rough figure and one that needs to be revisited with the help of more effective measurements. "There is a large number of SMEs operating in the tourism sector such as restaurants, hotels and local guides that are not registered as such as and therefore do not appear on our radar," Jean Léonard Nguema Ondo, the deputy general director of the DGT, told OBG.

Under encouragement of the UN World Tourism Organisation (UNWTO), a so-called Tourism Satellite Account (TSA) is now being implemented. The TSA encapsulates tourism activities according to the characteristics of the visitors themselves, of their trips, and of the goods and services used, such as transportation, food and beverages, and accommodation. Much of today's informal sector will be counted as a result, as will economic activities that were previously considered to be unrelated to tourism, such as transport and real estate. Once the survey is completed, the system then calculates the contribution of each of the categories to the sector's total, allowing for a reliable measurement of overall contribution to the country's balance of payments and GDP. In early 2009 a survey in the Estuaire province – in which the capital lies and where around 60% of tourism revenue is generated – was undertaken. It was finalised at the end of June 2010.

Although the figures remain unconfirmed until sign-off by the National Statistics Agency later in 2010, initial results indicate the sector contributes more than previously thought. "When extrapolating regional



Enjoy international accommodation standards
in a charming family-run hotel in Libreville

Tel : 446828 · Fax : 446838 · Mob : 03100303 · contact@hotellakewa.com

BP 4820 – Libreville, Gabon

Quartier Batterie IV, opposite to Gros Bouquet 2

figures to the national level, the sector's contribution figures around 6%," said Jean-Marc Lusson, who is supervising TSA implementation. The state aims to boost tourism's contribution to 10% of GDP by 2013. "It is a very realistic ambition," said Nguema Ondo. "If we keep booking the same positive results during the implementing phase, we will easily exceed this percentage."

The TSA has ground-breaking potential for development of the sector as its sound economic measurement will allow for support and orientation of decision-making processes of both the private sector and the authorities. Investment triggers, such as fiscal and financial incentives, as well as a national certification effort and public pressure on training and development of human resources, are expected as a result. After the Estuaire province, the TSA will be rolled out in the Haut-Ogooué area in the south-east of the country. Together with the capital province, this region will host the African Cup matches on Gabonese soil in 2012. "The high level of preparation of tourism facilities ongoing there at the moment, has driven our decision to prioritise the region," Odilon-Yves Boutoundou, advisor to the DGT and deputy coordinator of the TSA, told OBG. Besides better calibration of the sector for the authorities, the TSA is expected to raise the nation's profile among foreign investors. "Gabon is the first country in Central Africa to implement such a system which, in addition to being an effective tool for identifying investment opportunities, is a positive signal for the government's commitment to transparency," said Boutoundou.

GREEN PROSPECTS: Although business may be the purpose for which most visitors come to Gabon today, it is the country's pristine forest and abundant wildlife that will drive development in the long run. To facilitate this, policymakers are planning to capitalise on a well-developed image of environmental conservation. Whereas Gabon has been home to various environmental NGOs, such as the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) and the World Wildlife Fund, for several decades, it was not until 2000 that its ecology garnered international interest. That year, WCS explorer Mike Fay completed his 3200-km walk around Central Africa, discovering new species of flora and fauna at wildlife gathering sites, many within Gabon's borders. The well-documented event, also known as the Megatranssect, gained significant international media attention. Together with a regional movement to step up conservation efforts, it encouraged former President Omar Bongo Ondimba in 2002 to declare over 11% of the country's surface protected land, divided into 13 national parks.

GEOTOURISM: By 2007 the commitment was signed into law and the National Agency for National Parks (Agence Nationale des Parcs Nationaux, ANPN) was established. The ANPN is charged with transforming Gabon's national parks network into a global model for protected areas management. It is also responsible for stimulating the development of a geotourism industry, which is considered a step beyond ecotourism, combining sustainable development and conservation to such an extent that the geographical character of a tourism site is enhanced rather than simply preserved.

Among its objectives, the ANPN hopes to boost ecotourist visitor numbers from 2000-3000 to 100,000 by 2020. "In reaching this objective we need to market realistic rainforest experiences and its more common attractions, such as bird watching and the observation of the flora, rather than putting too much emphasis on close encounters with wildlife such as elephants and gorillas, which cannot always be guaranteed," said ANPN head Lee White. In support of this, the ANPN, together with the WCS and local NGOs, has set out a vision defining the needs and ways to attract "green" investments that comply with environmental requirements and generate returns that can be reinvested in conservation. Investment sites inside each of the parks have been identified, including real estate, flagship products and pioneer circuits targeting well-travelled, high-end tourists, as well as specialty visitors, such as birdwatchers. The high budgets and low environmental pressures associated with this niche offer clear benefits. In addition to tourism it is envisaged that ecosystem services, such as watershed protection, medicinal plants and carbon sequestration, will generate business opportunities as a source of finance for the parks. Although open to learning from past experiences, the government is adamant on safeguarding the uniqueness of Gabon.

"Creating a uniquely Gabonese product, rather than a pale image of Kenya, Botswana or Tanzania, is pivotal in our efforts to put Gabon on the world map as a high-end geotourist nation," White told OBG. One example is "Operation Loango", the brainchild of a private investor and WCS, which is situated inside Loango National Park. The establishment consists of a primary lodge surrounded by four satellite lodges offering circuit options to visitors. In addition to high-end accommodation, various lodges also offer visitors information on conservation efforts in the area.

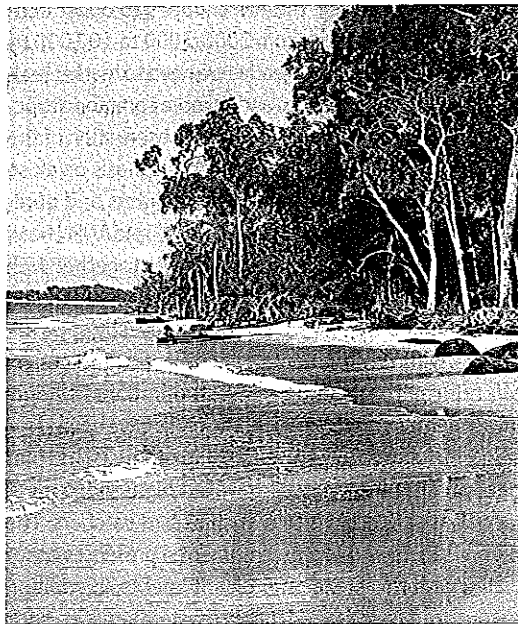
ANCHORING THE VISION: ANPN's vision has become the development policy of the Ministry of Economy, Commerce, Industry and Tourism. Earlier in 2010, a

The National Agency for National Parks is responsible for developing a geotourism industry. The agency has set out a vision outlining the ways to attract investments that comply with environmental requirements and generate returns that can be reinvested in conservation.

Libreville Airport total passengers, 2008-09

		2008	2009	Annual change (%)
Domestic flights	Port-Gentil	214,703	219,236	2.11
	Franceville	39,493	42,073	6.53
	Others	44,331	29,971	-32.39
	Total Gabon	298,527	291,280	-2.43
African flights	Casablanca	37,067	29,626	-20.07
	Addis Ababa	28,156	26,419	-6.17
	Coastal capitals	83,718	87,581	4.61
	Johannesburg	17,845	18,933	6.1
	Pointe Noire	16,269	17,871	9.85
	Louanda	82	125	52.44
	Rest of Africa	60,193	60,318	0.21
	Total Africa	243,330	240,873	-1.01
European flights	Paris	134,338	130,595	-2.79
	Rest of Europe	3639	8311	128.39
	Total Europe	137,977	138,906	0.67
	Others	99	67	-32.32
	Total	679,933	671,126	-1.3

SOURCE: Aeroport de Libreville



The government is aiming to increase sector revenues

Fiscal incentives have been put forward as part of the ecotourism vision of the National Agency for National Parks, including tax credits and deductions and import duty exemptions on sustainable building supplies aimed at smaller tourism units.

group of experts, led by Lusson, proposed a development strategy that the ministry is now evaluating.

Total investments in the tourism sector are estimated at CFA700bn (€1.06bn), of which CFA400bn (€608m) are tangible assets and CFA300bn (€456m) are intangible assets. Gabonese investors retain the dominant share, representing around 75% of investment in accommodation. Cameroonian investors come second with an estimated 10%. Gabonese authorities have stepped up their efforts to promote tourism investments, albeit at a slow pace. The minimum investment required for eligibility for three-year income tax break on new hotels has been lowered from CFA1.8bn (€2.74m) to CFA800m (€1.22m) over the course of 2009. Incentives include an eight-year income tax break on new hotels, exemptions of the value-added tax on construction materials used for tourism facilities, as well as breaks on stamp and registration duties, and tourism property taxes. Although the investment barrier is expected to be reduced to CFA600m (€912,000) before the end of

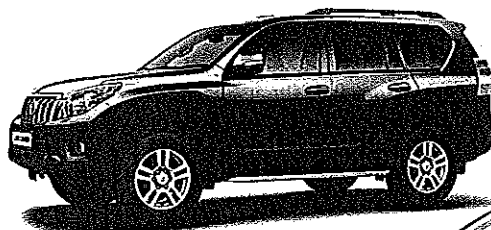
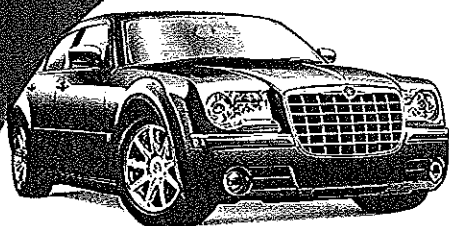
2010, private sector operators have criticised the measures for exclusion of smaller ventures.

Within the ANPN's vision, additional fiscal incentives have been proposed aimed at smaller tourism units including tax credits for small ecohotels meeting sustainability certification, import duty exoneration on sustainable building supplies and vehicles devoted to tourism, and tax deductions on investments made toward tourist promotions, educational materials or other activities that encourage tourism development.

PROMOTION: Private players highlight the need for a designated governmental office to handle tourism investment promotion. Under the new government the Ministry of Tourism merged with the Ministry of Economy, Commerce and Industry. Despite its leadership role, tourism so far seems to follow investment priorities for extractive industries, construction and real estate, and a widening of multilateral trade treaties. Besides the ministry, the ANPN, Gabontour and the Chamber of Commerce all count investment promotion among their responsibilities. "As the new government is settling in some confusion may exist, among a variety of public and para-public institutions, as to who should be involved in promoting the sector among investors," White told OBG. "Whereas it may take until the legislative elections in 2011 before the situation is definitely cleared up, President Ali Bongo's vision of a Green Gabon should reassure investors that their interests are being dealt with at the highest level."

OBSTACLES: Albert Engonga-Bikoro, the general manager of Gabontour, said, "The dilemma of kick-starting ecotourism is much like that of the chicken and the egg: we need investments to increase the number of tourists and a growing pool of visitors are needed to convince investors. The support of the state to break this cycle is crucial." Gabontour is responsible for the promotion of the country's tourism offer at home and overseas.

Gabon has a variety of hurdles to overcome to encourage investment, the most pressing of which is infrastructure. The lack of paved roads affects ecotourism in particular, as visitors typically follow circuits around



GAR-LIGHT

BP: 131 - Libreville / Gabon • Tel: 07-89-79-15

a variety of lodges. "For the moment, Libreville is the only departure point for various tourism sites so tourists are forced to head back to the capital every time they want to move somewhere else in the country," said Patrice Pasquier, the general manager of Mistral Voyages, a Libreville-based tour operator.

Besides a national highway linking Libreville to Franceville, Gabon's roads are largely limited to unpaved networks catering mostly to logging firms, and there is much work to do to rehabilitate existing roads and create new connections between the main cities. Domestic air links are also needed. In the past many operators, such as state-owned Air Gabon and private players such as Air Service, operated domestic flights. However, low numbers and internal management issues have made these unprofitable to the extent that Air Gabon has had to close altogether. At the time of writing Air Service had temporarily marginalised its operations due to financial constraints to keep its fleet in the air. Flights between Libreville and Port-Gentil remain frequent, but expensive. Furthermore, the blacklisting of all Gabon-registered airlines except for Gabon Airlines and Afrijet by the European Commission in 2008 has excluded it from the database of European travel agencies. Deteriorating connections have led to a drop in the number of visits to the country's interior, pushing some ecotourism facilities to close.

Air connections to Europe in particular are expensive. Due to Air France's near monopoly, prices between Paris and Libreville have traditionally been among the operator's highest. Although the opening of a link to Frankfurt in July 2009 and the competing offer of Gabon Airlines serving Paris directly have reduced prices to some extent, a higher frequency to Europe is needed to increase the competitiveness of Gabon among European ecotourists. Financial infrastructure also raises issues. Despite the presence of international banks such as Attijariwafa, United Bank for Africa and Ecobank, foreigners looking to withdraw money are limited to a small offer of Visa-connected ATMs. Card payments are not accepted anywhere in the country, obliging tourists to carry their travel budgets on them in cash.

A second obstacle is related to the sector's weak legal framework. As tourism was not an economic priority in the past, regulations have remained largely underdeveloped. A clear master plan identifying priority sites is unavailable for investors. Although various sites have been proposed by the ANPN, no legal application has been made to date. "The existing tourism laws are far from finished," White told OBG. "Around 15 laws applicable to tourism development are currently waiting to be pushed through government." A related



The National Agency for National Parks is hoping to increase the number of geotourists to 100,000 by 2020

issue is that of visa applications. Foreign tourists often find the application procedures unclear and lengthy.

APPROACHING EDUCATION: A further obstacle lies in the quality and the availability of human resources. Rural-urban migration has put additional pressures on tourism operators that are facing fierce competition from industries with a proven potential, as well as the public sector. Therefore, demands of a high-end clientele for English-speaking staff are often not met.

Due to the lack of local training institutes, tourism establishments are obliged to train their staff on the job. Whereas smaller structures in rural areas are a significant employer of locals, hotels and other tourism establishment in larger cities, such as Libreville and Port-Gentil, regularly prefer to recruit workers from surrounding countries such as Cameroon and Ghana.

Lusson said, "At the expected rhythm of sector growth of around 6% over the coming 10 years, 3000 additional individuals will have to be educated per year in addition to maintaining the training of current employees. The existing structures in Gabon are simply insufficient to cope with this demand." Although third-level tourism degrees are available at public and private institutions, the quality is considered to be below international standards. Overall, a combination of substantial political will and private sector initiative will be required to ensure ample qualified Gabonese human resources.

OUTLOOK: With ecotourism successfully implemented in a variety of countries around the world, Gabon has the opportunity to learn from the experiences of others. Although a critical base of ecotourism investments is yet to be attracted, the long-term vision for the sector is clear. The integration of the ANPN's vision in the tourism development plan shows that public policy is increasingly oriented towards sustainable private investment. As medium-term priorities are close to implementation, Gabon needs to ensure that tourism remains a focus going forward. Government commitment is required to overcome the sector's long-standing hurdles and to allow it to reach its potential.

To attract private sector investment the government is focusing efforts on upgrading infrastructure, addressing the legal framework and increasing the supply of qualified human resources.

Libreville hotel statistics, 2005-07

	2005	2006	2007
Customers	148,636	159,913	157,603
Beds	40,443	43,213	46,426
Employees	752	562	541
Turnover (CFA m)	13,311	14,569	16,687

SOURCE: Direction Nationale du Tourisme



Lee White

Ensuring conservation

Lee White, Executive Secretary, National Agency of National Parks, on establishing sustainable geotourism

The late President Omar Bongo Ondimba surprised the international community at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in South Africa in 2002 when he announced his intention to create a network of 13 new national parks in Gabon. In 2007 the enabling legislation was passed, creating the National Agency of National Parks (ANPN). The ANPN is in charge of transforming Gabon's relatively young national park network into a model for protected areas management, while stimulating the development of a geotourism industry and positioning Gabon as a tourism gateway to the African rain forests.

There is little doubt that the natural and cultural riches of the country can sustain such an industry. In an ecosystem unmatched elsewhere in the world, visitors can see forest elephants, buffaloes, gorillas, or even troops of more than 1000 mandrills, while walking along pristine beaches against a backdrop of tropical rainforest. Gabon's forests cover three quarters of the country and are home to more than 50,000 forest elephants, 15,000 gorillas and 20,000 chimpanzees.

Cultural sites offer equal potential for sustainable tourism development. There are 60 different ethnic groups, each with colourful traditions and a rich repertoire of music and stories. Gabon's masks inspired the likes of Pablo Picasso and Henri Matisse. Man has lived in Gabon's spectacular landscapes for over 400,000 years, and the earliest finely crafted microlithic stone tools known in Africa are from the Lopé region.

Ensuring conservation of Gabon's pristine rainforest while starting a geotourism industry is a delicate affair. Some of the key challenges are: how to develop tourism on Gabon's pristine beaches without spoiling their wild nature; how to habituate rainforest gorillas to ensure a unique nature experience; how to harness scientific technology to get tourists close to the spectacular herds of mandrills; how to integrate rural communities including pygmies into the green economy without destroying their social fabric; and how to create a uniquely Gabonese product, rather than replicat-

ing Kenya, Botswana or Tanzania. Furthermore, although Africa offers a number of precedents, the tradition of park management in Gabon is starting from scratch. The ANPN is responsible for overseeing everything in a network of 13 remote national parks, with only a small pool of qualified professionals to draw upon. Pressure on Gabon's natural resources is growing as intense exploitation in surrounding countries takes its toll.

Many national and international non-governmental organisations have been working on environmental issues in Gabon for 20 years or more, and over this time have developed significant knowledge and capacity. These organisations are valued partners of ANPN, and we are working with their management to formalise agreements that will see them become more and more active and integrated in our park management and tourism development activities.

Our main objective in 2010 is to become operational on the ground in all 13 national parks. My predecessors at ANPN developed comprehensive legal instruments that greatly facilitate our task. We are investing in equipment to allow park managers to do their job; in training of existing staff and recruitment of a cohort of middle management technicians to reinforce park managers, and in the systems that will be needed as we work towards our goal of making Gabon's National Parks network a model of effective management. We are also starting to talk to some of the world's leading ecotourism investors about possible joint ventures.

This is the ultimate sustainable development project. It touches all layers of the social fabric of Gabon, from the ambassadors in foreign capitals to the forest experts in rural communities; it pushes the government to improve the health and education services in previously neglected rural communities but is relevant to the global community, since Gabon's forests play a critical role in the climatic stability of the planet.

Additionally, it is the foundation of "Green Gabon", which is one of three pillars on which the president plans to develop his growth strategy, "Emerging Gabon".

Health & Education

National insurance plan bringing everyone into the fold

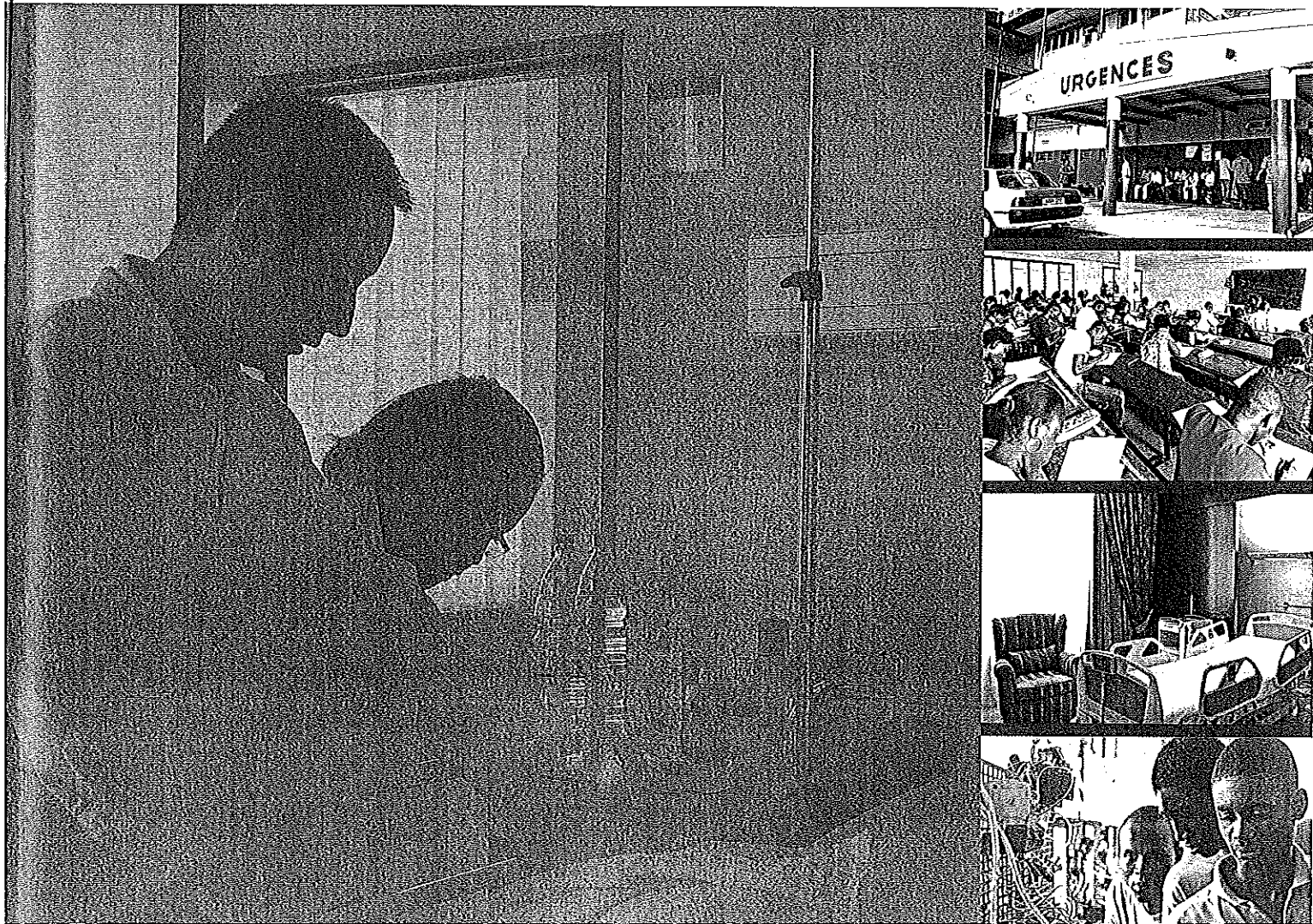
Several health indicators have seen rapid improvement

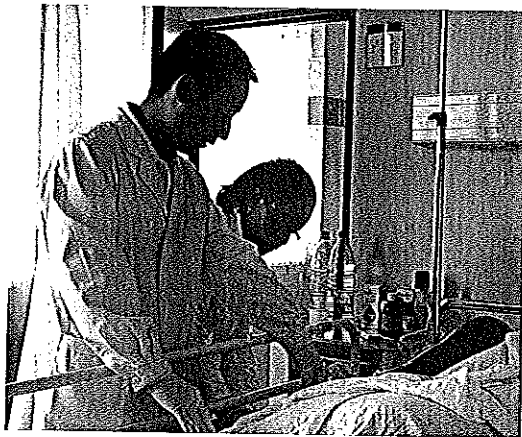
Leading the way regionally in HIV/AIDS treatment

International donors help build new universities

Major efforts to create advanced degree programmes

Focusing on post-secondary and university





Many public health services are provided free of charge

The root of the problem

A national insurance scheme and infrastructure upgrades should help to increase access and improve quality of care

Three hospitals located in Libreville and Port-Gentil are scheduled for expansion and rehabilitation, and a new hospital and cancer centre are being built to service areas outside of the cities.

The country is showing signs of successes in the health sector. Significant progress has been made over the past eight years in improving Gabon's immunisation coverage rates and reducing maternal mortality, two of the key health indicators that had deteriorated during the 1990s. Gabon also extended its network of regional public hospitals, building or renovating nine in the past five years.

HOSPITALITY: Libreville and Port-Gentil are home to the majority of Gabonese and have three hospitals that have been budgeted for expansion and rehabilitation. Much-needed renovations are also under way at the Libreville Central Hospital, which has been plagued by electrical problems and dilapidated machinery. The hospital, the country's largest, has been the scene of repeated strikes by medical personnel over working conditions in the past.

A new hospital and cancer centre are also to be built to service outlying areas of the city that have experienced rapid population growth. President Ali Bongo Ondimba said that the new projects, combined with a reorganisation of the country's existing resources, should ultimately increase the overall number of hospital beds in the capital by 1000.

In addition to free government hospitals and care centres, Gabon has a number of modern private and non-profit medical facilities that are in far better repair than the public facilities. Some have become medical and research reference points, and many are centres for the treatment of expatriate workers who fall ill or are injured around the region. The most advanced of these is the Army Training Hospital on the outskirts of Libreville, which is part of the Ministry of Defence. Built in 2005 and expanded in 2007, the hospital accepts patients from the general public. Among its speciality facilities are a pathology lab, a neurosurgery unit, a centre for mother and child health, and an advanced neonatal wing. The military hospital is expanding and is planning to add a pain clinic, as well as a modern forensics centre.

The world-famous Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lambaréné also provides a comprehensive range of medical services and houses a research centre on tropical diseases. Additionally, in 2009 a new private pay hospital was opened in the capital. The Egyptian-Gabonese Hospital is financed in part by the state and staffed and equipped through the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation in Africa (see analysis).

INFECTIOUS DISEASES: International donors have launched projects to improve sanitary conditions to reduce the spread of disease. Several projects have been approved to extend the country's drainage systems and improve sewage treatment in the big cities. Malaria remains the leading cause of illness, hospitalisations and death, but the central government is taking steps to increase public awareness and make more anti-malarial drugs available.

Meanwhile, Gabon's comprehensive HIV/AIDS treatment programme, which is run in cooperation with the French Red Cross, is considered a model for the continent. A special ministry devoted solely to administering the country's HIV/AIDS projects was created two years ago. Gabon's approach stands out because the government foots most of the bill for anti-retroviral drugs, providing them for free or at minimal cost to people infected with the virus.

Many other public health services are also free. Prenatal exams are subsidised at public health care centres and maternal-child clinics, for example. As of 2009, by government decree, women giving birth in public hospitals do not have to pay the cost of their care. While the announcement was welcomed by the public, it also may put additional pressure on the strained resources of older public hospitals.

INSURANCE PLAN: The most important innovation, and one that should go a long way towards improving overall access to medical care and drugs, was the 2007 introduction of a national health insurance plan that will eventually cover the entire population. Modelled roughly after the comprehensive social

Gabon's comprehensive HIV/AIDS treatment programme is considered a model for the continent because the government foots most of the bill for anti-retroviral drugs, providing them for free or at a nominal cost.

security systems in France and elsewhere in Europe, it is unique in Africa. Coverage is being extended in stages, starting with the one-third of the population considered to be the most poor and vulnerable, and the distribution of health cards began in late 2009.

Public employees will be the next group to be brought into the system, followed by employees in the private sector. Public employees already pay 2.5% of their salaries to the public health system, while retirees contribute 1.5% of their pensions.

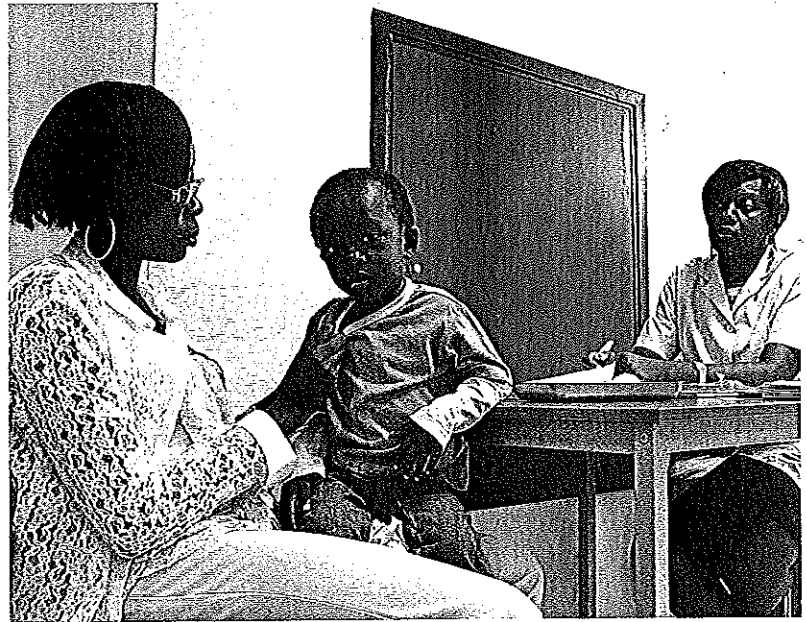
Private employees often pay into the system through their employers at an individually negotiated rate. They will be required to pay into the new insurance fund, however at time of press these rates had not been determined. The universal insurance programme should help to bridge the divide between the overburdened public health sector and private medical providers, whose fees put them beyond the reach of low-income families (see box).

"The national insurance plan is the most important of the country's health care reforms," said Dr. Inoua Aboubacar, a public health specialist with the WHO office in Gabon. "It is going to give a big part of the population access to care. What is especially significant is that they did not start with the working population, but with those who are the poorest."

FUNDING: Government spending on the health system increased to 7% of the budget in 2007, from 4% in 2003, and the infrastructure budget grew apace. In 2009 capital expenditures for the health care system amounted to CFA68.9bn (€104.7m), according to the Financial Bank. The investment in programmes and buildings appears to have paid off in terms of improvement in several vital public health indicators. A large part of the population, 81%, is now vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, or whooping cough. Only four years ago, the vaccination coverage rate was just 44%. The World Health Organisation (WHO) has recommended a renewed immunisation effort over the next three years to overcome persistent structural problems, such as shortages of medicines and limited access to care for rural populations. A major effort to urge families to have their children vaccinated against measles and polio has also been launched.

Several public-private partnerships in the health care field are helping Gabon overcome the organisational problems in its system. One is a project of Total Gabon and the French Development Agency to finance a pilot information technology project at an ambulatory HIV/AIDS treatment centre in Nkembo.

The organisations will set up a computerised system to track patient care and centralise their records so that the Ministry of Health can better allocate drugs and resources around the country. Total also provided funding in 1974 to build the International Medical Research Centre in Franceville, which specialises in tropical disease research. The hydrocarbons giant still finances ongoing research and special projects, and underwrote the cost of a 2008 conference on the Ebola and Marburg viruses in Libreville.



81% of the country is vaccinated against diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, up from 44% four years ago

INDICATORS: Another positive trend is that the infant mortality rate has declined by 30% since 2000 and stands at 60.1 deaths for every 1000 live births, according to the UN Development Programme. The improvement suggests that the government's anti-malaria efforts and new mother-child health centres have made a difference. However, the infant mortality rate is still considered inconsistent with Gabon's economic level and potential.

The maternal death rate also remains stubbornly high, at 520 deaths for every 100,000 live births, and showed no improvement over most of the last decade. According to the local office of the World Health Organisation, there is now some evidence of progress that may be confirmed when the government completes a new national health demographics survey. Again, improved prenatal care and wider availability of public hospitals and health centres are thought to have made important contributions.

Other health indicators are on the upswing as well. Medical personnel now assist in approximately 90% of all births in the country. The WHO reports that about 80% of pregnant women also have at least one prenatal exam, and 65% have the recommended four exams before they give birth.

As in much of Africa, malaria is the leading cause of illness, death and hospitalisation overall, and accounts for 28.3% of deaths in the under-five age group alone. The Health Ministry runs regular service announcements on television to raise awareness. Mosquito nets saturated with insecticide are distributed in the cities and local health centres.

A provincial network of malaria treatment centres is envisioned. Addressing some the conditions that ease the spread of malaria in cities (which include poor sanitation, open sewers, standing water and overcrowding) could see the rate of infection decline in the most-affected urban areas.

After malaria, the other major killers are acute respiratory infections, which cause 10.7% of deaths,

Government spending on the health system increased to 7% of the entire budget in 2007, up from 4% in 2003. In 2009 capital expenditure for the sector amounted to €104.7m.

diarrhoea 8.8%, and various neonatal diseases that combine to cause 35.1% of deaths.

INFRASTRUCTURE: New infrastructure projects are expected to reduce the incidence of malaria and related diseases. Rapid urbanisation has made improved sanitation and waste treatment a priority. The government announced in 2010 that its goal is to ensure that entire population has access to clean water by 2017 and to make clear progress in extending water treatment capacity by 2012 in Libreville and other big cities. The African Development Bank (AfDB) has been providing loans for expanding water treatment systems in the larger cities for several years.

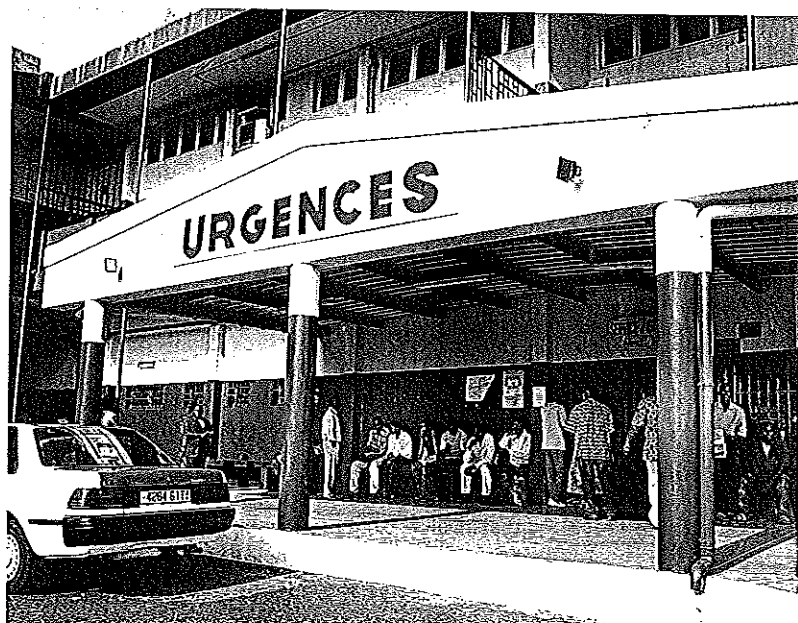
A lack of sewage and water drainage is also a problem for overall public health. Nationwide, just 36% of the population benefits from modern sanitation systems, and an AfDB study found that water-borne diseases like typhoid and malaria account for more than 40% of the admissions to health facilities in the under-developed provinces of Ngounié and Ogooué-Lolo. The French Development Agency is tackling the problem in two of Gabon's biggest cities, Libreville and Port-Gentil, where the agency is funding an €89m project to improve and install drainage.

Gabon is also focusing on improving the organisation of medicine distribution across the country, a problem that is exacerbated by the poor state of the roads in the interior, which also makes it difficult for people to get access to care. Communication among the regional health centres is improving, enabling anti-retroviral drugs to be delivered when and where HIV-infected patients need them. A computerised system to put all HIV/AIDS records on a centralised network is starting with a French-funded pilot project. The project envisions 10 HIV treatment centres around the country that will be equipped with software for tracking patients, their medicines, pharmaceutical deliveries and social service visits.

ORGANISATION: Gabon is divided into 10 public health regions. Each has a public hospital and at least one regional health centre offering out-patient services. Government dispensaries are spread across neighbourhoods in the cities, as well as towns and villages in the interior. The Estuary region, which includes the two biggest cities of Libreville and Port-Gentil, has two public hospitals. A third one is to be built in Angondjé, a northern suburb of the capital that has grown substantially in the past few years. Within each region, the state has also set up mother-child centres, where children under the age of one are vaccinated, and treatment centres or walk-in clinics for people with HIV/AIDS.

All told, there are 41 free public medical centres across the country, 51 mother-child health centres, 413 public dispensaries and 157 rural infirmaries offering basic consultations.

A second tier of health care is provided by quasi-public hospitals that charge a fee and primarily serve workers covered under employer health insurance schemes. There are two of these in the Libreville area. The biggest is the Jeanne Ebori Foundation Hospital,



The country is divided into 10 public health regions, each with a hospital and regional health centre

a 200-bed facility that is undergoing renovation and expansion. The second is the Paediatric Hospital in Owendo. A third general hospital of this type, the Paul Igamba Hospital, is in Port-Gentil. The Army Hospital on the outskirts of Owendo is run by the government and provides free service to servicemen and their families and fee-based service to the general public. Nine quasi-governmental medical centres are scattered across the country.

Two hospitals that are run by churches or non-profit foundations, the missionary-run Bongolo Evangelical Hospital in Ngounié, and the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lambaréné, serve areas in the interior. Gabon also has an extensive network of private clinics, pharmacies and hospitals. There are also several fee-based hospitals built and equipped by other countries, including the Egyptian-Gabonese hospital in Libreville and two smaller facilities built in cooperation with China and Morocco. Private companies, including Total, Shell and the mining company COMILOG, have their own dispensaries.

HIV/AIDS PROGRAMMES: Gabon has taken a proactive and progressive approach to HIV/AIDS, illustrated by its decision in 2008 to create a separate ministry to deal with the virus and coordinate prevention efforts and treatment.

The country is also one of the leaders in Africa in implementing comprehensive testing, treatment and social services for people living with HIV.

Over the past three years, each of the 10 public health regions has been supplied with a dedicated treatment centre or walk-in clinic targeted to HIV patients and their families. Each is staffed by a social worker, doctors and service workers who follow up on patient treatment and make home visits. Nutrition is also part of the comprehensive approach. The centres are equipped with a communal restaurant where people who come in for services or treatment can get a meal. In addition, the government has set up six referral HIV/AIDS centres around the country.

In addition to the 41 free public medical centres, 51 mother-child clinics, 413 public dispensaries and 157 rural infirmaries, there is a second tier of quasi-public hospitals that primarily serve workers with employer health insurance schemes.

The national health insurance scheme, enacted in 2007, is being extended in stages to different parts of the population, starting with those who are least likely to have private insurance and cannot afford to pay for care.

Nationwide, 8.1% of the population is estimated to be infected with the virus, with the majority in Libreville. In 1991, when testing started, an estimated 2.8% of the population was believed to be HIV positive.

Another unique feature of the Gabonese approach is that the government purchases medicines for drug therapies. It has been spending between CFA1bn (€1.5m) and CFA1.5bn (€2.3m) a year to purchase anti-retroviral drugs. They are provided free to infected pregnant women, students, low-income people and young children. Others pay a nominal cost of 2%, or about CFA1500 (€2.28) for the drugs.

The programme receives funding from the UN, the French Red Cross and other donors, and was designed on the French ESTHER (Ensemble pour une Solidarité Thérapeutique Hospitalière En Réseau) model that involves close partnerships between Gabon public health workers and their French counterparts.

The ministry has tried to be creative in its outreach and public awareness campaigns. In 2010 it distributed some 63,000 condoms to young people at events, nightclubs and gathering places in Libreville.

OUTLOOK: Quality health care has long been out of reach for Gabonese with limited incomes, but over the medium term the new national health insurance programme should improve access to basic and speciality medical services for the poorest and most vulnerable parts of the population.

The renovation and expansion of the busy main public hospitals, which most people use for primary care, must take place while the institutions are still in use, which means that the improvements will most likely come on-line in a piecemeal manner. The country's innovative HIV/AIDS programme and its efforts to reduce maternal and child mortality have already started showing positive results.

These improvements are expected to continue once the country's long-discussed project to link treatment centres through an automated system is complete. Foreign-financed projects, including those to clean up the sprawling cities and install sewage treatment facilities and drainage, may prove to be the best weapon for Gabon in its fight against malaria.

BOTTOM-UP REFORM

Universal national health insurance coverage was mandated by a 2007 law that created the National Insurance and Social Welfare Fund. The law provided for the plan to be funded by a 10% levy on the revenues of mobile phone operators and a 1.5% fee on money transfers, with the state making up the rest of the cost. The tax plan has not been implemented yet, and the fund is just getting off the ground, so it is not clear yet what its full costs will be. However, the programme promises to make a big and positive impact on the health choices of ordinary Gabonese.

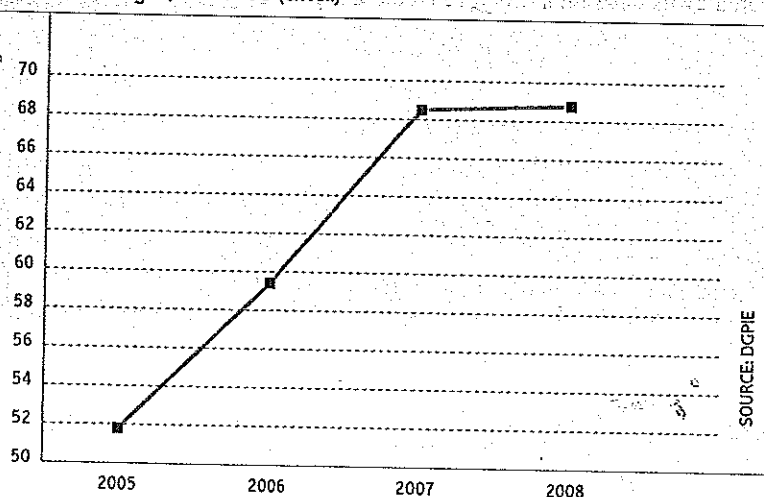
Coverage is being extended in stages to different parts of the population starting with those who are least likely to have private insurance and are unable to afford to pay for care. A survey found that about 30% of the population had incomes of less than CFA80,000 (€121.60) or were in other ways considered the most vulnerable, including the unemployed, rural farmers, the self-employed and the poor. The state started distributing health cards to this group in December 2009 and the medical costs will be covered up to a limit set by the fund, which is negotiating rates with private and semi-private hospitals and medical centres.

The insurance plan will next be extended to the country's 64,000 public sector employees and then to private sector workers. People in both groups will be required to contribute to the fund and pay an amount over the fund-approved fee for drugs, care, treatment, hospitalisation and doctor's office visits. Nearly all medical services will be covered by the insurance plan, including visits to specialists, surgeries, nursing care and non-drug medical supplies prescribed by physicians. Retirees are to have free health insurance for care in public hospitals and health centres.

The insurance will be a boon to the many Gabonese families who prefer to go to private clinics, pharmacies and doctors, rather than deal with the long waits and uneven service at the free public hospitals. As an example, the Army Hospital outside Libreville, which is considered the top hospital in the country, is now charging CFA5000 (€7.60) for a basic consultation. The insurance Fund would pay CFA3000 (€4.56) of that, with the insured patient paying the remainder.

The government has contracted with the Dutch company Gemalto on a pilot project to incorporate digital fingerprint data on the health insurance cards. The electronic identification system would allow health providers to verify the identity of patients, but also help the government create a centralised database of users. Registration centres equipped with digital cameras and fingerprint sensors are being set up throughout the country.

Health budget, 2005-08 (CFA bn)





The Army Training Hospital has 150 beds and 60 rooms

Keeping healthy

The capital's hospital system is expanding

Gabon is renovating, expanding and refurbishing a number of hospitals in Libreville, where nearly half the country's population lives. The Libreville Central Hospital is the biggest in the country, with nearly 650 beds, and has been in need of modernisation for some time. Personnel have gone on strike to protest conditions, while electrical problems have shut some units. In 2010 the emergency room went without water or power for several days. Since 2007, when the government declared that the hospital should treat low-income people for free, doctors said its chronic problems of overcrowding and lack of trained medical staff have worsened.

OTHER OPTIONS: A programme of repairs has been ongoing at the aging facility for several years. To relieve some of the pressure, the government will also build a second general hospital and cancer unit in the growing neighbourhood of Angondjé, a northern suburb of the capital Libreville. In 2009 it obtained loans of CFA60bn (€9.1m) from Fortis Banque to build and equip the two new centres. President Ali Bongo Ondimba said the new hospital, as well as a planned restructuring of hospital services in the capital, should make 1000 new beds available in the future.

In contrast, the Ministry of Defence runs an ultra-modern, fee-based hospital on the outskirts of Libreville that opened in 2005 and acquired an CFA18.8bn (€28.6m) extension in 2007. The 15,000-sq-metre Army Training Hospital, staffed by both military and civilian physicians, has an obstetrics and gynaecology wing with three birthing rooms, a pathology lab, a neonatal unit, a dental unit and neurosurgery service featuring a team of neurosurgeons from China. It contains 150 beds and 60 rooms, including a VIP clinic with a presidential suite for dignitaries.

The hospital plans additional upgrades and expansions that will create a special pain clinic with its own pool for therapy session and increase laboratory space. Its forensics laboratory and morgue will be upgraded and expanded and the hospital is also developing training programmes in emergency medicine. While the

hospital is free for military personnel, few Gabonese apart from the wealthiest have been able to afford its services. That is changing with the implementation of the national health insurance plan that will cover part of the costs of consultations at the army hospital.

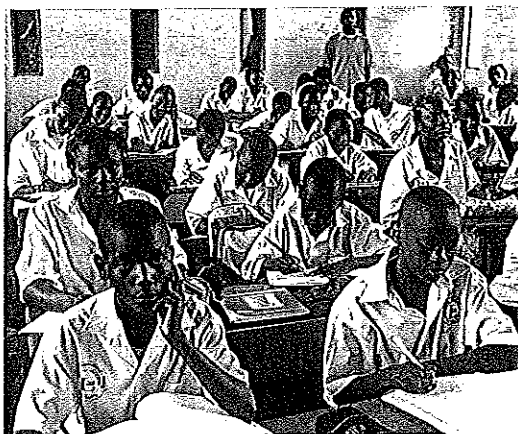
REPUTATION MATTERS: In addition to the army hospital, several private, non-profit hospitals have won international reputations. The best-known is the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Lambaréné, which offers surgery, primary care, mobile dental clinic, general and tropical medicine, paediatrics, maternity and gynaecology services. It is also a dispensary for the region, and picks up the slack in the interior where public health services are often insufficient. Many people from the capital go there for treatment, as its prices are lower than private hospitals in Libreville.

The 2010 budget also earmarks CFA431m (€655,000) for supplying drugs and medical supplies, as well as maintenance costs for the regional hospital in Oyem, the fourth-biggest city. A project to expand and rehabilitate three other hospitals at a cost of CFA32bn (€48.6m) was approved by the government in 2006 but work has proceeded slowly.

The three in question are the 200-bed Jeanne Ebori Foundation Hospital in Libreville, which is to be expanded and repaired after a fire in 2009, the Pediatric Hospital of Owendo near Libreville and the Paul Igamba Hospital of Port-Gentil. All three are part of the quasi-public, pay-for-service network.

In 2010 a new private hospital, the Egyptian-Gabonese Hospital, opened in Libreville. Gabon furnished the building and the Egyptian Fund for Technical Cooperation in Africa provided medical equipment, some drugs and a team of doctors. The Sino-Gabonese Friendship Hospital, was refurbished and work started on upgrading the operating room to bring it up to WHO standards. Since 2000, regional hospitals or their equivalents have been built in the provincial and departmental capitals Port-Gentil, Franceville, Koulamoutou, Lambaréné, Tchibanga, Makokou, Oyem and Mouilla.

Renovation and expansion programmes are under way at several public hospitals, including the Libreville Central Hospital, the biggest in the country.



Producing graduates with marketable skills is the goal

Refreshing the system

Reforms to maximise the nation's human capital

With help from international donors, goals for the sector include revamping curriculum, strengthening teaching standards, reducing class sizes, and tackling rural and adult illiteracy.

Gabon is carrying out an overhaul of its education system, which has expanded in the past decade at the university level but suffers from a lack of investment in primary and secondary schools. The twin aims of the new drive are to get more students to stay in school and to ensure that they then graduate from high school and university with marketable skills.

With assistance from international donors, a major construction programme has been drawn up to build new scientific universities, vocational schools and institutes geared to the country's oil and mining industries and the nascent economic sectors of resource management and ecotourism. The government is also hoping to develop its human capital. The country's plan for education, developed in the 1990s and fine-tuned in 2010, calls for revamping curriculum, strengthening teaching standards, reducing class sizes and tackling the stubborn problem of rural and adult illiteracy.

GOALS: In May 2010 Les Etats Generaux de l'Education, a national conference in education, set out a number of goals that have been endorsed by President Ali Bongo Ondimba and government ministers. It called for a refocus on vocational training to prepare young people for jobs in growth industries in Gabon and expansion of the successful network of seven speciality science and mathematics high schools. At the same meeting, the president said he intended to equip schools across the country with multimedia centres and Internet service that could be used by the community.

He also set out an ambitious vision for a public-private partnership to enhance higher education in Gabon, although no further details have yet emerged. He invited the private sector to aid in building libraries, digital campuses, virtual universities, student and faculty housing and facilities supplied with renewable energy. Investors, he said, would be offered "a sort of university free zone" based on favourable tax treatment and lower Customs duties for any materials they import.

In a country where the median age is 19, education reform is seen more than ever as the key to develop-

ing Gabon's economic potential. Though Gabon is a leader in Africa in providing universal education for its youngest children – it has a primary school enrolment rate of 88%, far higher than the average 73% in sub-Saharan Africa, according to the UN 2010 "State of the World's Children" report – the country's educators have been frustrated by the high dropout rate and by declining pass rates on the tough national exams.

Government officials also want to keep more of the country's most ambitious and talented young people in Gabon. The government offers a generous subsidy package for those who study abroad. Those scholarships account for much of the CFA40bn (€60.8m) it spends each year on direct aid to high school and university students. Another CFA5bn (€7.6m) is available to children at secondary schools which, according to the French system, is divided in collèges and lycées.

A better use of resources, in the view of both the government and education specialists, would be to give every faculty the staff and the means to offer advanced degrees. "The idea is to create centres of excellence in different fields and to keep students in the country to do their studies," Jean-Francois Thardin, the director of the grants program and a professor at the University of Health Sciences, told OBG. "There are a number of faculties that already offer bachelors and masters degrees, and there are a few that offer doctorates. But, particularly in the sciences, you have to go abroad for advanced degrees."

In terms of primary and secondary education, Gabon faces a number of interconnected challenges. The population has become steadily more urbanised in the past two decades, leading to overcrowding in schools and a shortage of facilities. In the 1990s the population of Gabonese cities grew by 4.3% each year. Since 2000 the rate of urbanisation has slowed somewhat, to an annual rate of 2.5%. But the demographic shift has put the school system under pressure.

Capital expenditures on education in 2009 amounted to CFA38bn (€57.8m), 0.06% of GDP. Even so, Gabon

urgently needs 1000 more classrooms for primary and secondary grades, according to Jean-Michel Ella Essone, the secretary-general of education in the Ministry of National Education, Higher Education, Scientific Research and Innovation. "The urban population has grown," he told OBG, "but school construction has not kept pace." Gabon has a reserve of qualified teachers but not enough jobs to offer them. This year, for example, 4000 candidates applied for the 300 available posts in public primary schools.

Similar growth is evident in higher education, a priority area for the government. In the past seven years, university enrolment grew by 50%, although the teaching staff increased by 25%. Meanwhile, overall education spending in Gabon has remained fairly steady, at 3.9% of GDP, the equivalent of what poorer countries such as Cameroon spend and less than is spent by North African countries with similar economic profiles.

Private schools have proliferated in this environment. Religious schools have a long history of providing an alternative to the public education system in Gabon. In recent years, they have been joined by a growing number of commercial private primary and secondary schools. An estimated 26% of all secondary school students attend private high schools. A series of public teacher strikes over the past two years has pushed the government to extend the school year into the summer to make up for lost days, with such disruptions driving more families to pay for private schools.

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOLS: The Gabonese system is based on the principle of free, universal education for all that rests on internationally recognised testing standards and is compulsory from ages six to 16. It is broadly based on the French model.

Children start at age six with primary school, which lasts for six years. Secondary school is divided in two phases. In the first students attend middle school, called *collège*, for four years. At this point they take an exam, which is meant to test knowledge of material learned, but which has proved to be a bottleneck and is set to be eliminated by 2016. The next stage is *lycée*, the rough equivalent of high school, where they may choose either a general education or a technical or vocational track. At the end of seven years, students who choose the general education track may sit for the national graduation exam, or *baccalauréat*, which is the passport to enter university. The success rate on the exam has hovered around 30% to 40% in the past few years.

Nine provincial school districts oversee the system, with policy matters and strategy centred in the Ministry of Education. The availability of resources, staff and facilities varies widely from one area of the country to another. Nationally, the average class size is 45 students. In some rural areas, however, schools have as many as 60 students per classroom. Class sizes are even bigger in some urban high schools, according to the ministry. In two sparsely populated interior provinces studied by the African Development Bank (AfDB), students have to travel as far as 77 km to get to a high school. A shortage of transport and teacher housing also contribute to a 40% rate of teacher absenteeism in some provinces.



Primary school attendance is 94%, the highest in Africa outside of the North African states

The government has invested in pre-school education but demand is greater than the supply of facilities and teachers. A recent EU study of Gabonese educational resources and student performance found that fewer than 5000 children attend public preschools while eight times that many apply for a spot.

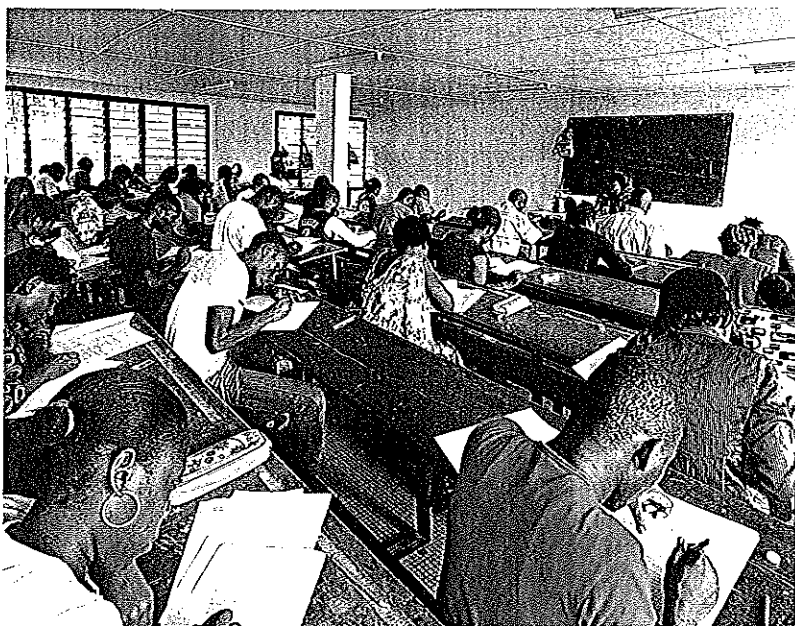
Still, Gabon has had marked success in getting young children to start going to school. Primary school attendance overall is 94%, the highest in Africa apart from North African countries. Its other noteworthy achievement is that equal numbers of boys and girls, as well as urban and rural children, are represented. The dropout rate, though, remains stubbornly high.

Of the Gabonese pupils who start, 44% do not stay in school through the last year of primary school, according to the government. In secondary school, enrolment falls to 53% of high-school-age boys and 46% of high-school-age girls. Studies by international organisations found the pattern of school-leaving continues on to and through university. The AfDB, for example, reports that the dropout rate is 30% for Gabonese secondary school students and 40% for university students. A significant number of students need additional time to graduate, with 25% of students in secondary schools and 75% of students in higher education institutions repeating grades or courses.

PRIVATE: Gabon has a well-established private school network. An increasing number of families are turning to private schools in response to overcrowding in the public system and the repeated shutdowns caused by teacher strikes over the past few years. The final report of the national education conference held in December 2009 said families are also choosing to pay the cost of private schools because they see the public schools as rundown, underfunded and fixed on an "assembly line" approach to education.

Accredited private schools receive some financing from the state. The Ministry of Education said Gabon now has 715 public schools and 744 private primary schools. Of the private schools, 236 are affiliated with

An increasing number of families are turning to private schools in response to overcrowding in the public system. Accredited private schools receive some funding from the central government.



Efforts are focused on advanced degree programmes so more students can complete their studies locally

the Catholic Church, 182 are Protestant and 326 are non-denominational schools. In terms of lycées, there are 31 public and 35 private. At the level of collège, there are 51 public and 11 private schools.

On top of the standard general education system, Gabon has a range of vocational and professional training schools and institutes. There too, privately owned schools have made inroads. The government has accredited 21 private advanced skills training schools and 39 private vocational education centres. On the public side, there are nine intermediate and two advanced vocational or trade schools. There is strong demand for more. A recent European Union study of Gabonese educational resources and student performance found that only 10% of the candidates for vocational training schools get accepted because of shortage of space.

Students who choose a technical or vocational track after college enter intermediate-level, vocational lycées, which are run in cooperation with trade unions and employer groups and provide 18 months of classes. Students are then placed in private and government internships for on-the-job training. They then have the option to continue on to more advanced technical training. Two of the intermediate-level schools are in Libreville and there is one each in Port-Gentil, Tchibanga, Kouala-Moutou, Oyem, Makokou, Franceville and Koulamoutou. Again, demand is greater than the supply. An EU study found that 10% of the candidates for vocational training schools get accepted because of shortage of space.

HIGHER EDUCATION: Gabon has made a substantial investment in the last decade in building up higher education. Between 2001 and 2005, when the state's budget for other parts of the education system remained stable, spending on higher education increased by 42%. The University of Health Sciences was founded in 2002 and a number of specialised schools for management studies, natural resource management, technology and technical education were spun off from existing universities. The government decided in 2007 to build three new universities that focus on specific industries

such as tourism and oil. Some of the initial work of site selection and drawing up architectural plans has begun. With €123.7m in financing from the AfDB, its biggest ever education loan to a sub-Saharan country, Gabon is also to refurbish and expand its existing universities and scientific institutes in the next four years.

Beyond infrastructure projects, a major effort is being made to acquire the human resources necessary to create advanced degree programmes at all faculties, enabling students to obtain bachelors, masters and doctorate degrees at domestic institutions. The strategic goal is to equip Gabonese students to take up technical and managerial jobs in promising new industries such as tourism, IT and forestry management.

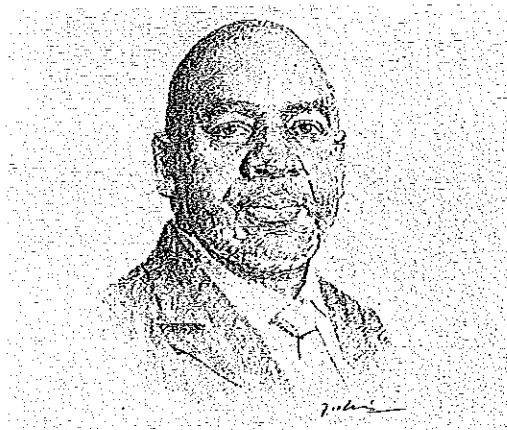
The biggest public institution, with 12,000 students, is Omar Bongo University in Libreville. Established in 1971, it has faculties of law, economics, arts and humanities, as well as schools of education, technical teacher training and management studies. Masuku University of Sciences and Technology was opened in 1985, in Franceville. Its faculty of sciences has an enrolment of nearly 900 students. It also has a polytechnic school with an enrolment of 360 students who study for certificates in civil engineering, telecommunications engineering and systems diagnostics. The third public university is the University of Health Sciences, created in 2002 when the medical school was separated from Omar Bongo University. It trains doctors, midwives, anaesthesiologists and other medical personnel.

Gabon also has a number of small, specialised public and private higher education institutions geared towards advanced students including the public National Forestry and Water School, the National Institute of Management Sciences and the Higher Institute for Technology, and various private institutes concentrated on civil engineering, IT and industrial maintenance.

The government plan is to have the three new universities open by 2016. They will incorporate some of the speciality programmes at the advanced institutes and also focus on specific sectors in which Gabon is trying to develop new industries, including biotechnology, environmental science and tourism. The site for the new University of Oyem, which would consolidate existing scientific institutes and laboratories, has been selected. Also, an architectural plan for a second new university in Mouilla has already been submitted by a team of Gabonese and Dutch architects, and plans for a third university at Port-Gentil are in the works.

OUTLOOK: The establishment of advanced degree programmes at Gabonese universities should greatly enhance higher education standards, although it will mean a substantial investment in personnel and, most probably, the hiring of more expatriate professors in the short term. The construction of three new, specialised public universities outside of Libreville should also relieve some of the overcrowding at the country's main public campus. The AfDB program to build new vocational and professional lycées will help address the high drop-out rate in primary and secondary schools by providing pathways to employment for young people. Resolution of the problem, however, will take time.

The government plans to have three new universities open by 2016 that will focus on specific sectors in which Gabon is trying to develop new industries such as environmental science and tourism.



Cheick Modibo Diarra

Adopting best practices

OBG talks to Cheick Modibo Diarra, Chairman, Microsoft Africa, and Special Advisor to the President of Gabon

What can African governments do in order to bridge the digital fracture that exists between Africa and the rest of the world?

DIARRA: A digital fracture exists not just between Africa and the rest of the world, but between rural and urban areas within Africa itself. Technology is being rapidly adopted in Africa, and today there is little difference between a PC and a mobile in terms of functionality and user benefits. However, connectivity in Africa is still, on average, 50 to 100 times more expensive than it is in the US, preventing the bulk of the population from realising the full benefit of technology. One of the major challenges is connectivity within both urban and rural areas. But with the advent of the under-sea cable connecting Africa to the rest of the world, we are beginning to witness improvements.

African governments should provide a special status to the ministries that are in charge of information and communications technology (ICT), as well as integrate ICT programmes within the presidency itself. Also, governments should remove taxes and duties to make IT access affordable for people. The private sector needs assistance from the government to operate at the most effective level possible.

ICT is one of the few industries where countries do not need to reinvent the wheel. Governments can adopt best practices from around the world and from Africa itself. A key recommendation for governments is to implement dedicated advisory boards and create an ICT watchdog body that keeps an eye out for new technologies. Governments can thus ensure that correct investments are made and that flexible architecture exists for the private sector.

What steps are needed to reduce IT illiteracy?

DIARRA: Governments need to start with their own employees by providing the latest technology and training. Government departments should be communicating electronically, as this facilitates an understanding of technology and its key benefits. Clearly the private

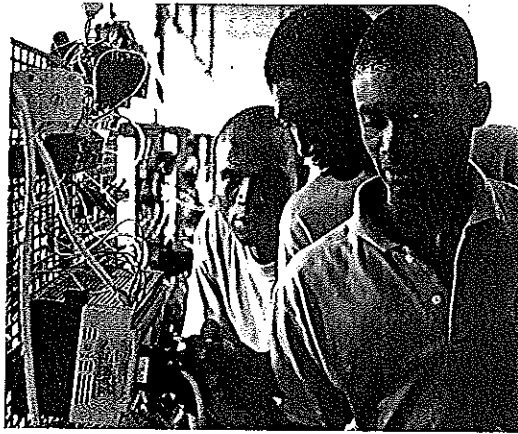
sector has a critical role to play. Public-private partnerships are therefore essential. Governments would also be well advised to ensure that teachers are trained so they in turn can train students.

What potential does Gabon have to become a regional example of IT competence?

DIARRA: As part of his vision for Gabon, President Ali Bongo Ondimba has put forward the image of a country focused on service where every Gabonese national is literate. As the political will is in place, this vision can become a reality. To create a competent Gabonese labour force in the ICT sector, best practices from across the continent should be adopted. The government could also incentivise partnerships between its own local labour force and the private sector operating in the country that is linked to the global ICT sector.

What is the role of the Gabonese diaspora in establishing a digital, service-based economy?

DIARRA: The role of the Gabonese diaspora is fundamentally that of knowledge transfer. Furthermore, the entire African diaspora is available to Gabon. If the competence from every African country is harnessed, a suitable ICT solution is within reach. Gabon is not suffering from a brain drain. Rather, it hasn't yet created a sufficiently attractive business environment. Once this is established, not only will Gabonese expatriates return in droves, but so will multinationals looking for suitable business opportunities. With the government providing the correct opportunities, a brain gain is more likely. One of the key benefits of the high-tech ICT industry is that both time and distance no longer have a material impact. By cleaning up local business environments, African governments have the ability to create a culture of facilitation and growth. Leadership within the Gabonese government is aware that high-level ICT strategies must reside in the president's office for them to be truly effective. Combined with effective advisory boards, Gabon's ICT industry can only grow stronger.



Vocational and technical schooling is getting more attention

A broader scale

Focusing on post-secondary services

A €123.7m programme to construct and refurbish campuses and schools is aiming to make the Gabonese education system more relevant to the job market.

The African Development Bank (AfDB) is financing an ambitious four-year programme to modernise post-secondary education in Gabon. The cost of the Public Services Higher Education and Vocational Training Support Project, as it is called, is CFA81.4bn (€123.7m), with 90% to be funded by the AfDB and the remainder by the Gabon government. Part of the money is earmarked for capacity-building reforms in universities and the Ministry of Education, to strengthen and computerise financial management systems and develop teacher training modules. Some 80% of the grant will be used to construct and refurbish campuses and schools.

DEVELOPING SKILLS: The AfDB, as well as the EU, has funded programmes to improve education in Gabon since the 1990s. This loan is the biggest ever made to any sub-Saharan country for education. The overall objective of the project is to make the Gabonese education system more relevant to the job market. A recurring concern has been that young people finish school without gaining the skills or credentials that are needed by the country's industries. AfDB, in its survey of the education system, found that eight out of every 12 new university graduates fail to get a job because their qualifications do not match the requirements of the market. More critically, Gabonese high schools do not have the resources or staff to provide needed vocational training for students who do not go to university. Just 8% of the teacher corps is in vocational schools. The overwhelming majority of students, 92%, opt for the general education rather than the vocational track during their secondary school years.

Another concern is that not all faculties in Gabon offer advanced degrees, meaning that students frequently have to go abroad to study for masters or doctorate degrees at great cost to the government. Each year, the state covers the tuition, living expenses and travel costs for 6000 to 7000 students pursuing degrees at foreign universities. The cost to the budget is CFA50bn (€76m) a year, according to AfDB. That is more than Gabon spent on capital improvements to the system in 2009.

The generous scholarship programme allows Gabonese students to further their studies. But it also illustrates the need for an overhaul and modernisation of state universities. "This has resulted in the country funding training in disciplines that are not directly related to the national development strategy," the AfDB reported in its outline of the project's expected outcome. By improving the quality and relevance of their curricula, it said, Gabonese universities should be better able to keep local talent at home and reduce government expenditures on scholarships.

SECONDARY SYSTEM: To enhance secondary education, four vocational high schools will be converted to technical schools and three vocational schools will be built. A vocational school in Leconi, a catering school in Libreville and a technical school in Koulamoutou will be completed and equipped. Gabon's three public universities, in Libreville and Franceville, will also undergo extensions and refurbishing, as will five advanced professional schools and three scientific research institutes.

The government is also moving ahead with plans to build three new universities that would prepare graduates for managerial and technical jobs in the oil, mining, tourism and agriculture sectors, as well as business administration and resource management. The three projects were announced three years ago, but lack of funding during the recession has prevented them from moving beyond the planning stages.

Designs for one, the university at Mouilla, have been finished. The school would specialise in urban planning, architecture, protection of cultural heritage, and hotel and tourism studies. The site has also been chosen for a university at Oyem, which would consolidate and expand three existing schools: the Higher Institute of Agronomy and Biotechnology; the Higher Institute of Environment and Biodiversity; and the Institute of Elementary Sciences. Ground was also broken in 2009 for a third university at Port-Gentil, which will incorporate faculties of management sciences, business, oceanography, and petroleum and chemical sciences.