COP23 opened in Bonn, Germany, on 6 November. The event, which brings together between 15,000 and 20,000 participants from around the world, is an opportunity to take stock of the implementation process of the 2015 Paris agreement, which went into effect last year, and of the improvements to the global climate agreement, which were adopted at COP22 in Marrakech. Africa, which is extremely affected by climate change, is at the centre of the discussions – a fact highlighted by the creation “Africa Day” during this edition, which is organised jointly by the AfDB, the African Union, UNECA and NEPAD. The continent’s core concern is its ability to put the Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs), which were announced at COP21 in Paris, into operation from a financial perspective. This issue was discussed in the West African context at a side event organised on 9 November by CILSS, ECOWAS, UEMOA, BOAD and OIF. Several senior institutional leaders discussed the progress that has been made with respect to the Paris agreement using the regional roadmap, before presenting the various mechanisms that the region is using to accelerate the process. Similarly, UCLG and Energies 2050 have launched a task force to help African cities and territories access climate financing and they presented their roadmap to help African local governments improve 90% of its surface area since 1960. These developments were discussed at a meeting of the expert joint working group of the Sahel region climate committee’s member countries.
REGIONAL COMMITMENTS TO FIGHT AGAINST COASTAL EROSION

At COP23, the World Bank organised a discussion, which was also transmitted on Facebook live, about the problem of coastal erosion and flooding in West Africa. The World Bank has set up the West Africa Coastal Areas Programme (WACA) to address the problem. These issues severely affect coastal and island countries from Mauritania to Gabon. Over the last few decades, more than 13 million people have been directly affected by coastal erosion, which in some areas is increasing by 10 meters every year, due to rising sea levels and intensifying tropical storms. This trend has social and economic effects; its impact can be seen in port infrastructure as well as in fisheries, coastal agriculture and urban management. Addressing the problem requires a regional approach, since the effects of erosion move across administrative borders and the interventions carried out in one country might have repercussions in a neighbouring country. Regional co-operation is also one way to pool available funding and co-ordinate the work on this issue.

ECOWAS BUILDS CAPACITY IN NATURAL DISASTER RISK MANAGEMENT

In the run-up to COP23, ECOWAS and African Risk Capacity (ARC), a Pan-African insurance that specialises in helping countries prepare for natural disasters, have strengthened their partnership. The two institutions signed a memorandum of understanding on the side-lines of the annual meetings between ECOWAS technical and financial partners. Their partnership fits in with the ECOWAS natural disaster risk management policy, as well as with its agricultural policy and climate change adaptation initiatives. It will focus on the exchange of knowledge, data and early-warning methods between ARC and ECOWAS member states, with the goal of building capacity in order to prepare for and respond to natural disasters. Since the creation of ARC in 2012, three West African countries, Mauritania, Niger and Senegal, have benefited from a climate insurance risk pool after being affected by droughts.

SHIFTS IN THE US STRATEGY IN THE SAHEL

The ambush that killed four American soldiers in Niger on 4 October has stirred up a public debate in the US. The controversy over the nature of the US intervention in Niger has been fuelled by the US military’s lack of transparency about this operation. Niger is home to the largest US military force in Africa, but this force has typically focused on advise-and-assist missions to support Nigerien troops. From this base, the United States participates in various security and counterterrorism efforts and initiatives in the Sahel, as is the case with Operation Barkhane. However, US intervention efforts have been concentrated in Algeria, Libya, Mali and Nigeria, not in Niger where US interests are not officially threatened. However, the attack on these four US soldiers and the Nigerien patrol, which was initially presented as a reconnaissance mission, proved to be a search for a jihadist leader. This event has highlighted two major developments: the place of Niger in the Sahel security problem, particularly in the three-country zone that includes Burkina Faso and Mali; and the shifts that seem to be happening to the US strategy in the Sahel. With the need to step up the fight against Boko Haram, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in the region, the United States may increase its presence and abandon the low-profile strategy that it has preferred until recently.
TUNIS GETS CLOSER TO ECOWAS

During his courtesy visit to the commission president at the ECOWAS headquarters in Abuja, Tunisian Trade Minister Omar Behi expressed a desire to strengthen economic exchanges between Tunisia and West Africa. They discussed several partnership opportunities, and a memorandum of understanding between Tunisia and the regional organisation will be signed during the next visit of president de Souza to Tunis. The two representatives also discussed the process of Mauritania’s readmission to ECOWAS and Morocco’s bid to join the regional organisation. The following day, Tunisia’s new ambassador to ECOWAS, Jalel Trabelsi, presented his letters of accreditation and reiterated Tunisia’s determination to strengthen ties with all ECOWAS member states. At the 51st ECOWAS summit last June, Tunisia was granted observer status with the West African organisation.

NUTRITION AND FOOD SECURITY IN NIGERIA

Conflict, drought and food price inflation are the main causes of food insecurity in Nigeria. The Boko Haram conflict has displaced massive numbers of people and has put more pressure on food resources in the northeastern part of the country, where violence is leading to a decline in agricultural production and is depriving farmers of stable incomes. Children are particularly affected; according to UNICEF, 11 million children suffer from stunting across the country, and more than one out of two of these children are from the northern regions. Their chronic malnutrition is also the result of the nutritional poverty that characterises the diets of the poor and is itself due to the lack of information about the types of food that should be targeted. Their low incomes are not the only explanation for this nutritional poverty, since nutrient-rich products are not necessarily more expensive or harder to find. The lack of knowledge about nutrition issues explains why the poor make these food choices. There is a direct link between ignorance, growth disorders and poverty. Nutritional deficiency affects children’s ability to learn and, more generally, it affects both the development of the country’s human capital and its economic productivity. The World Bank estimates that every dollar spent on nutrition is worth between USD 8-138. Since last January, the Nigerian government has set up a school food programme in three pilot states in the south and centre of the country, which should benefit 15 million primary school pupils. However, nutrition interventions need to be extended across the country, and involve related issues, such as maternal nutrition.

OPINION: THE PERCEPTION OF AFRICAN RURAL MIGRATION IS WRONG

Laurent Bossard, Director of the SWAC Secretariat, and the economist Jean-Marie Cour were invited to the programme “Eco d’ici Eco d’ailleurs” on RFI, a French public radio channel, where they discussed the issue of rural migration in Africa. They lamented the often-false perception of this phenomenon, which shows how difficult it is for observers and development actors to change the paradigm when it comes to how the continent’s transformations are analysed. The recent surge of migration to northern countries is fuelling the image of a deserted rural Africa, hit by a mass exodus, even though the African rural population and its agricultural productivity continue to grow. In reality, the rural movements observed on the continent correspond mainly to internal and regional settlement dynamics, which organise and redistribute the rural population according to market locations and other urbanisation processes. This important socio-demographic fact should prompt us to stop viewing urban and rural policies separately, and to give greater importance to the links between cities and rural areas. Beyond the central issue of infrastructure, which is integrated across areas, one of the priority areas for action is to provide more support for the informal sector. This sector, which accounts for about 80% of Africa’s employment, is often a gateway for rural youth coming to urban areas and provides a space for mobility between the cities and the countryside. In addition, by serving as a bridge between agricultural production and urban consumption, it is at the heart of the African food economy boom. Nonetheless, public policies and development aid tend to neglect this sector.
UNICEF has published a statistical report on child marriage in West and Central Africa. As a previous Maps & Facts have shown, the region remains one of the most impacted by early marriage, which is one of the practices that the sustainable development goals seek to eradicate. Seven West African countries rank among the top 20 countries in the world with the highest rate of child marriage [Niger (1), Chad (3), Mali (5), Guinea (5), Burkina Faso (5), Nigeria (12) and Sierra Leone (19)]. In Niger, three out of four girls marry before their 18th birthday. Nigeria and Niger are among the top 20 countries with the highest absolute number of child marriages, with 3.3 million and 609,000 married girls, respectively. Although a number of West African countries have experienced a decline in the prevalence of child marriage, the report explains that, given the region’s population growth, it is imperative that they increase the ongoing work to reduce the overall number of children marrying early. Several courses of action are proposed in the report.

Since May 2017, the Beninese economist Jonas Gbian has become the UEMOA commissioner in charge of policies and initiatives related to agriculture, water resources and the environment for countries in the UEMOA area. Gbian’s key responsibilities concern the co-ordination and orientation of the Union’s common policies for rural development. The portfolio of the former DSAME department (now DAREN) was recently readjusted. It previously also included the mining sector and food security. Born in 1965 in Ina, in the department of Borgou in Benin, Gbian holds a diploma in economic policy management from the University of Abidjan-Cocody and a diploma in banking management from the West African Training Centre for Banking Studies in Dakar. Gbian previously held ministerial positions in Benin, initially as minister of energy, water and mines, and then as minister of economy and finance. When he was appointed as UEMOA commissioner, he was serving as deputy director of the BCEAO. Commissioner Gbian aims to contribute to boosting UEMOA community actions and make them more effective. “People must feel in their daily well-being the actions we are taking”, he declared.