

**COVER  
INTERVIEW**

# committed to change

Alleviating poverty on the continent is no small challenge, but Kerry Dimmer finds that there are those, like Frannie Léautier of the African Capacity Building Foundation, who are making huge strides

## **It's not easy for African-born women**

to become visible, to rise to prominence in a male-dominated world, and in Tanzania, where Dr Frannie Léautier was born into a big family, there were few women leaders whose example she could emulate.

This did not stop her, however, achieving firstly a BSc in civil engineering from the University of Dar es Salaam, followed by a MSc in transportation and a PhD in infrastructure systems, both from MIT. She is also a graduate of the Harvard University Executive Development Programme. These accomplishments drew the attention of the World Bank, whose incredible work in the development of Africa is something Léautier greatly admired.

Cumulatively, Léautier served in various capacities at the World Bank for 15 years, rising to the rank of vice-president and head of the World Bank Institute. When she left the World Bank, it was to pursue a business venture that focused on risk management and leadership development.

But the World Bank and Léautier continued to work closely and she returned as the executive secretary of the African

Capacity Building Foundation (ACBF). Its work in building sustainable human and institutional capacity in Africa for poverty reduction meant Léautier could help generate great change in the life of many Africans.

The foundation's approach is multi-dimensional: to build individuals through skills and knowledge, to strengthen the capability of an organisation to perform, and to facilitate an enabling environment for institutions to perform optimally.

Over the past 15 months, under Léautier's leadership, disbursements to programmes are higher than at any point in ACBF's history and the share of the ACBF portfolio that is rated 'highly satisfactory', has tripled.

'The quality, too, of our controls in terms of effectiveness and the transparency in which our funds are used, has increased so much,' explains Léautier, 'that the ACBF has been labelled the safest place to put investment money in Africa. I am very proud of that distinction.'

'Wherever I go – whether it's to visit member states and projects we support or even in conversations with stakeholders

like the World Bank or the African Development Bank and its bilateral agencies – the resounding message is the importance of the ACBF in the transformation of Africa.'

It is also the potential that the ACBF holds for the future, based on its own development over the past 20 years, that will scale up the organisation's activities. There are four key focus points Léautier is driving.

Firstly is the advancement of policy unit centres in Africa. 'In the early 1990s there wasn't a single think tank in Africa. It's through ACBF's financing that we now have 27 such institutes in 22 African states. The results from policy reform generated through these think tanks' efforts into designing and researching ideas for policy transformation, have been numerous.'

Such reforms have motivated meaningful and constructive change in a diverse number of areas such as financial supervision in the banking sector, economic policy for poverty reduction, macroeconomic stability, and fiscal policy, to name a few.

Going beyond the successful creation of more think tanks, the ACBF is now driven

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to network them and have them integrated into the flow of their host governments.

Léautier points out that there are two clear emerging challenges on Africa's horizon that need serious attention – energy and water. She says the second focus point is the building of capacity that will produce solutions that will be able to handle crisis issues, environmental pressures and the viability of sustainability. Included in this is the process of transforming cultures, such as agriculture.

'To this day, many Africans depend on agriculture for their livelihood, so transforming this whole supply chain is key,' explains Léautier. 'In this area the ACBF supports programmes that develop people academically to master's level and provide agricultural policy education so that this knowledge can be shared.'

It is in the third key area that Léautier believes the ACBF will make the biggest impact – helping to build regional capacity. She believes that countries alone cannot achieve success without support from regional contributors that provide the potential to grow markets and improve the strength of the private sector.

No organisation of this nature can ignore the struggles of many African countries to find peace and stability and so it is that the ACBF, in its fourth key focus, will be working with fragile

states to help them transition from conflict to stability, creating an enabling environment for people to benefit from development.

Foundations are generally funded by goodwill and are driven by the belief in an objective. Without results, however, such foundations flounder. The ACBF is not one of those, its proven value as a catalyst for change in Africa has brought about support from 34 member states, the World Bank, the African Development Bank, bilateral donors, the IMF and other smaller entities.

More recently, the ACBF has received interest and some funding from the private sector, which is an area that the organisation is very keen to work more closely with in terms of aiding policy change for private sector development.

2011 is the 20th anniversary of the ACBF and will also see the launch of its flagship publication, *African Capacity Indicators*, which will play a critical role in bringing the capacity development agenda in sub-Saharan Africa to the fore.

This publication will look at the key issues and challenges facing in-country and cross-border developments, and the ongoing efforts to support regional co-operation. The foundation believes that it will be a definitive knowledge product.

It is poverty that is ultimately the main driver of the ACBF and poverty alleviation and eradication that lies at the root of

Léautier's unwavering devotion to the cause to conquer and heal the ails of the continent. Her hardest personal challenge is patience, she says. 'Africa is living on borrowed time, and with all the challenges I see and the pace at which change takes place, I feel that time is not on our side.'

As a result, she is careful to temper her optimism and her drive for results to avoid becoming what she believes would be an 'overbearing and pushy leader'. Instead, she wants to be seen as someone who motivates and stimulates innovation, creativity and meaningful results.

'The business of capacity-building is a long-term and rather complex arena for change, requiring enormous flexibility to adapt to emerging issues and, again, this requires immense patience. While I have learnt to celebrate even the smallest of results, I have also learnt to bite my lip in anticipation of the really big ones.'

There is, albeit slow, a growing recognition of the decision-making role women play in effecting change for Africa's economic, cultural and social upliftment.

People like Léautier symbolise the potential of the human spirit to create prosperity, and in so doing demonstrate how commitment and tenacity work hand in hand to realise a vision. **AD**